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CAT EARS
ネコ耳少女

# Prologue

There is a bar called the Stray Sheep. It's a small establishment, tucked quietly away in the corner of a dull, dirty town. While it does carry many kinds of alcohol, here and there you can find run-down sections of the interior that are reminiscent of the dried-up skin of a woman past her prime.

Neon lights that flicker on and off, on the verge of exhaustion. Cigarette smoke with nowhere to go. The faint, wafting stench of garbage. It is a modest, wholly uninteresting bar, and yet at night, men of the town with nowhere to go gather there as if drawn in by it, almost as though trying to scoop up the broken fragments of their lost dreams—or, perhaps, to forget the dreams they are about to have, even if only for a moment. This is the tale of a man who found himself at one such bar…

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In front of the television, several regulars passed around stain-covered bills as they tipped back their glasses. A women's professional wrestling programme was being broadcast on the large LCD display behind the counter.

Galaxy Women's Pro Wrestling. Ahead of the GWWA title match, even the Stray Sheep, usually as silent as a rain-drenched grave, had had a little life breathed back into it.

"Which're you betting on, Toby?" a slightly stylish man wearing a checkered hat asked his companion, fishing out a one dollar bill that he had thrust into his pocket. He

appeared to be in his early thirties. His yellow goatee was conspicuous against his angular face.

"Feather, duh," replied the thin young man clad in blue overalls. Compared to the man in the hat, he looked quite young. He seemed to be putting on airs to look cool, as someone of his age would, but one of the virtues of someone who is ignorant to the world's workings is their inability to hide things. He spent his days being teased like a small animal by the man in the hat and his other friends. "Feather Adonis's on a streak of successful defences, after all."

"I wonder." The man in the hat stroked his goatee.

"Huh? You mean you're gonna bet on Betelgeuse, Orlando?"

"The pay-out is way bigger if she does it."

Orlando took a gulp of his Budweiser and tossed a few notes at the man who was giving out the odds. The man took them wordlessly, made a note in his notebook and returned to the other customers.

"You sure do love to gamble, huh. Unfortunately for you, though, Feather's got this one in the bag."

"The safe choice, huh? What a boring life you must lead."

"No way. The safe choice is the best choice."

"Gah. Hey, Jonny. You say something to this kid with no dreams," Orlando said to his other companion, but his spot at the table was vacant. All that remained was a cigarette that had lost its owner, smoke drifting up from it as it lay on the ashtray.

"Hm? Did he go for a shit?"

"Nah, he's over there. Look."

Toby tugged on Orlando's sleeve and jerked his chin in the direction of a man who looked to be about the same age as Orlando. His striking hair, black as a raven, and sharp features betrayed his Asian heritage.

The man stood in front of a coin-operated game cabinet in a corner of the cramped bar, an antique jukebox beside it. He pressed the start button on the free-to-play game.

"Christ. He's playin' that game again?"

"Jonny's taken a liking to it recently."

"Yeah. I wasn't interested at all at first, but it's pretty addictive once you get started."

"I'm gonna go take a look."

Toby, who worked under Jonny and idolised him like a big brother, scuttled over to him like a baby squirrel that had found food.

"Hey, wait up. Aren't you gonna watch the match?"

Orlando regretfully looked over at the TV. The title match was about to begin, and a quiet sense of excitement was building within the bar.

"In the red corner, the champion, Feather Adonis!"

Once the announcer had finished, a blonde woman wearing a risqué costume raised her hands high on the other side of the fuzzy CRT screen, responding to the cheers of encouragement.

The TV was perched on the edge of the bar. His eyes met those of the bartender standing on the other side of it. Strictly speaking he didn't know whether their eyes actually met, since the bartender was wearing sunglasses, but he looked at Orlando and gave him a profound smile. As if to say *I know*, he used his index finger to resettle the sunglasses on the bridge of his nose.

He was normally just a middle-aged old guy who didn't stand out from the crowd, simply telling unfunny jokes to Erica, the waitress, who would jump in with her own retorts, but sometimes he felt like he could see through him. It was a damp, unpleasant feeling—like a washerwoman pulling her hand from the lake in which it was submerged and using it to stroke the cheek of a traveller who happened to be passing by.

"Ah, fuck it." He reflexively resettled his hat so that it was low over his eyes and obstructed his view. "Oh well. I'll just look at the results of the match later," he said to himself, turning his back, deciding not to watch the match and instead walked over to Jonny. "How's it goin', Jonny?"

"He's doing good," Toby answered for him. Peering over his shoulder, he could see a prince on the screen inside the cabinet, clambering up the exterior walls of a castle in order to rescue the princess imprisoned within.

"Rapunzel"—that was the game's name. Despite being a simple game where all you had to do was climb the stacks of blocks, as you played it over and over you would come up with surprising tactics and unexpected methods to beat it, and couldn't help but lose yourself in it. For Orlando and his friends, it was becoming even more of a passionate hobby than betting on wrestling matches.

"I've already beaten your record," Jonny muttered as he worked the levers. The score that Orlando had managed a few days earlier had been knocked off of the high score list displayed on the game's screen.

"Seriously? I'd only just beaten Vincent's, too. Goddammit. I'll get you next time."

"Speaking of which, Vincent's not here today, is he?" Toby said as if he'd suddenly remembered.

Vincent was one of their drinking buddies, who had done all manner of stupid things with Orlando and Jonny since they had been in high school together. They were just stuck with each other.

"He only just got a new job recently. Maybe he's just busy?" Orlando murmured, rubbing his goatee.

"Nah, he must be with Katherine," Jonny retorted quickly. "I saw her recently, and she told me that there was something she wanted to talk to him about."

"Katherine, huh..."

Vincent's girlfriend. She always wore glasses and black clothes, like she was in mourning dress. She had also been

in the same class as Orlando and the others.

"They've been together for such a long time. She must have her own take on things."

"Makes you jealous, doesn't it? I wish I had a girlfriend."

Toby gazed longingly in the direction of Erica, who was ferrying around alcohol on a tray. With her yellow uniform and red hair, she stood out wherever she was.

"Moron." Orlando grabbed Toby's head and pushed it down. "Male and female relations are more trouble than they're worth. Vincent must be at a cake shop or somethin' right now with Katherine in a cold sweat."

"Tch, I fell." Jonny tutted and banged on the cabinet. The prince, failing in his endeavour to scale the tower, plummeted into the abyss without ever reaching his princess.

*GAME OVER* was displayed in a garish yellow. A witch sneered beside it.

"Lemme have a go next."

Switching places with Jonny, Orlando took his hand out of his pocket, rolled his shoulders, and suddenly remembered something.

"Come to think of it… I haven't seen him lately."

"You mean that guy who works for the game company?"

"Didn't he say his name was Freddie or somethin'?"

"Well, it's only natural after an incident like that," Jonny muttered, looking like he was dredging through the depths of his memory, causing him to have a flashback to a scene he had all but forgotten.

A man with wild eyes. An ominous note. A deserted house. Fluttering curtains. The news that a woman was dead.

"I'm sure he's doing just fine somewhere."

"Yeah," Toby responded to Jonny's monologue, but his voice sounded somehow vacant.

"A man who had nightmares, huh?" Orlando said in a low voice. No one replied.

"Oh my. Feather has used her Crimson Messiah, an illegal move! Betelgeuse can't get up! It's over!"

Only the voice of the commentator on the wrestling broadcast was audible, sounding like a clown who had stumbled upon a funeral.

A rumour that you would die if you had nightmares. A mysterious string of deaths from weakness. It was a chilly night, a few months before they were to become caught up in all of this.

# Chapter 1

*"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player."*
—Shakespeare

When he regained consciousness, he found himself standing in an unfamiliar place. Freddie McGoohan's body trembled with a chill that seemed to lick at his skin.

"Where... am I?"

It was a dim world. He seemed to be outdoors, but couldn't tell whether it was daytime or night-time. A faint red light shone down on Freddie, with flagstones laid out at his feet.

A huge wall stretched out before him. It blocked Freddie's way, made up of gigantic stone blocks that were stacked in the shapes of stairs for many levels, resembling a pyramid. Each of the blocks was taller than Freddie, their width roughly the same as his outstretched arms. They were laid out upwards and across in an orderly fashion.

The difference between it and a pyramid was that no matter how high up it went, its width was unchanged. From whichever side he viewed it, the wall of blocks extended endlessly. However far up he looked, he could see no end. It seemed to stretch on eternally.

"Where am I?" he muttered once more. His expelled breath froze white, warning him that it would be dangerous to linger here. "I was on my way home from work..."

He had returned home and met with someone. They had dined together, drank wine, and then... He couldn't remember.

"Is no one else around?"

Being all alone in this desolate world was hugely unappealing.

The voice he squeezed out vanished as if absorbed into the red sky, but instead he caught a glimpse of something moving. To his right, Freddie could see something that looked like a person's silhouette. A silver rosary glinted at their breast. He ran along the edge of the wall of blocks. He wanted someone to explain to him what was going on.

"Hey."

But the voice cut off inside his throat. As he approached, the silhouette transformed into something that couldn't possibly be human.

"Who're you?"

A sheep. It was a sheep.

He stood on two legs, staring straight at Freddie with red eyes containing oblong pupils that made it hard to tell where he was looking, turning his head restlessly. The two horns peeking out from his head resembled those of a demon.

"U... Wh..."

He fell on his backside. The chill from the icy stone floor crept up through his abdomen into his core.

"Get up. I can't talk to you like this." The sheep was definitely speaking in human words. It twitched its nose as if sniffing Freddie's scent. "You reek of woman."

"Woman... Oh. I..."

A fragmented memory came back to him. A woman with long hair like a waterfall of gold. She always bragged about it. Tapping away rhythmically at the keyboard whilst humming the same old phrase. Her name was...

"Stella. Where is she?"

Freddie, standing up, approached the sheep. His eyes must be so bloodshot that they were the same red as the sheep's.

"Where am I? Let me go home to her."

"Shut up." The hand he tried to grab onto him with was roughly shaken off. "I dunno where we are. There is one thing I do know, though." The sheep looked up, raising its hoofed front leg in the direction of the wall and looking up at it. "If you wanna get outta here, you've gotta climb that thing."

"By 'that,' you mean this wall?"

He looked up again. It was tall. For Freddie, who was an indoors person, the idea of scaling these stone blocks felt like being ordered to dive the Mariana Trench without a diving suit.

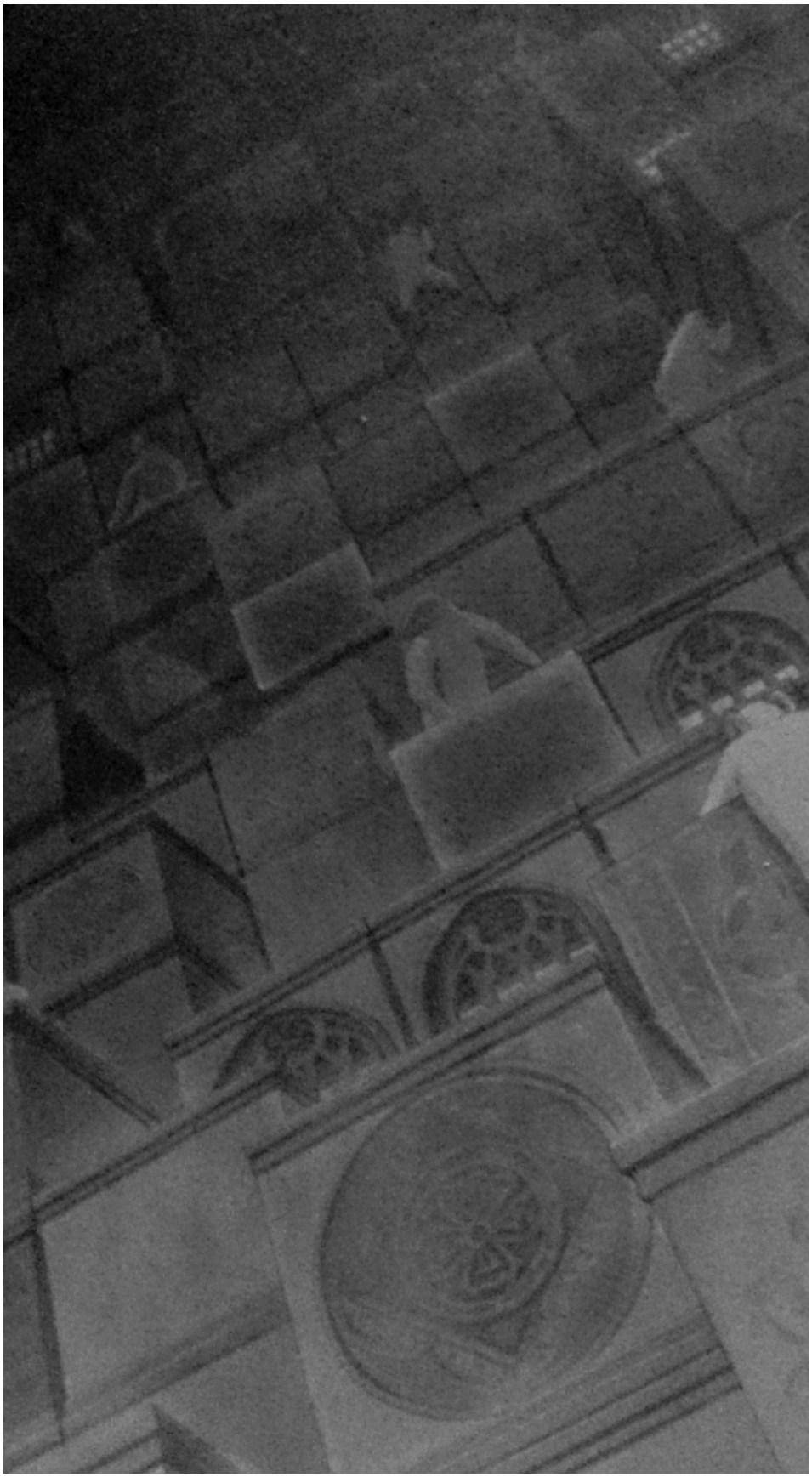
"That's impossible." He shook his head in despair.

The sheep stamped his foot in irritation. "Don't give up so easily. Look. The other guys are desperately climbing up there."

Now that he'd said it, he could see squirming things here and there on the giant stone blocks. As his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, he could tell that it was a flock of sheep.

Tens of sheep just like the one in front of him were grabbing onto blocks and climbing them level by level. They looked like barnacles clinging to the stomach of a whale, making Freddie feel sick.

"Well, what're you gonna do? Are you climbing up there or not?"



"I can't."

His answer was the same. He had no rock climbing experience. Freddie was no more than a humble game-maker who spent his days in front of his computer monitor.

"Then you can stay here for the rest of your life. I'm off."

The sheep cracked its jaw and turned back to the wall, abandoning Freddie.

"Wait. Don't leave me behind."

"Shut up. Here, you've gotta look out for yourself. You don't get the luxury of hanging around."

"What?"

"You can't hear that voice?"

Lifted on the cold wind, he could hear something in the distance. It was a woman's voice, like a scream or a sob.

"…What?"

He turned around in bewilderment. There was nothing on the other side of the blocks—literally. The ground came to an end no more than a few yards from where Freddie stood. It was another dimension, like a black hole, which even sucked in the light. The voice was coming from inside of it.

"Help me. Help me."

Pleading and hatred. Jealousy and passion mingled within the shriek. The moment he heard the voice, Freddie felt something fraying inside his heart. *No. I don't want to be here. Somebody, let me out.*

"You get it, don't you? It's some kinda terrible thing. If you don't want it to catch you, you've gotta climb that wall."

Without waiting for Freddie any longer, the sheep grabbed onto a stone block and began to climb. He couldn't understand how it was able to climb with its hoofed sheep legs, but everything going on here was completely absurd.

"Don't leave meee!"

The voice became conspicuously higher, and something leapt out of the abyss. It was a straw rope—no, a tentacle. He didn't have the time to make a clear distinction, but in any case it was something the colour of a candle, with something like a long cord flecked here and there with red speckles dangling down, wrapping itself over and over again around the torso of a sheep that had been clambering up the block wall a distance away from Freddie and the other sheep. The tentacle took the shrieking sheep with it, being swallowed back up by the abyss at the same speed from whence it had sprung out of it.

"Hel... Gbuh, gehagf..."

The sheep's screams suddenly trailed off on the other side of the darkness. He could hear the sound of flesh being torn. There was a bursting noise, like the sound of a balloon popping, followed by the sound of slurping. For the first time in his life, Freddie felt all of the blood in his body run cold.

The next thing he knew, he was frantically grabbing onto the castle wall. It wasn't a question of whether or not he could climb it. If he didn't, he would die—just like that poor sheep.

"Yeah. That's it."

He couldn't hear the words of the sheep who had first spoken to him. All he could think of was simply getting out of there.

*"Help me. Help me."* He had to go somewhere he couldn't hear the voice. *"Why did you abandon me?"*

*It doesn't matter where, just so long as it's a place away from this spine-chilling voice. Save me.*

He put his right hand on top of a stone even taller than he was. He dragged himself up, putting his entire body weight on his arms, similarly to the way he had when doing chin-ups on the horizontal bar as a child.

Finally, he had managed to climb the first level. As he scaled the wall of piled-up blocks, he noticed that some

were missing here and there. There were rows with an empty space exactly the size of one block. Even still, though he didn't know exactly how it worked, the top portion never seemed like it would collapse, managing to maintain an unsteady balance.

Fortunately, the sheep Freddie had spoken to earlier had gone on ahead. He observed his actions, and found that as long as he grabbed onto the same spots it was not too difficult to clamber up. Thanks to this, he was able to climb high up in a shorter length of time than he had anticipated. The woman's voice that made him shiver gradually grew distant, before eventually vanishing entirely.

Still, he couldn't be complacent. As long as he couldn't turn back, the anxiety pursued him everywhere. He wouldn't be at peace until he had climbed the whole way to the end.

"That's the way. Good job."

Cheered on by the voice of the sheep with a rosary, Freddie fired himself up once more and looked up. He should have climbed quite a way, and yet the stair-shaped stone blocks seemed to continue infinitely. The black wall towered above, a red world as its backdrop.

Finally, he could no longer find a stable foothold. It was hard to tell them apart by their appearance, but some fragile blocks were mixed in with the others, the bottom falling out and the whole thing crumbling if carelessly climbed onto.

"Woah."

Freddie barely managed to get out of danger by swiftly moving to another block. As he climbed, the arms with which he supported his body began to grow numb. Could he really make it? The unease that crept into his heart seemed to multiply like a malicious virus with each breath, expanding and engulfing Freddie and scattering doubts within him.

"Don't waste your time dwelling on it," came the sheep's voice from afar.

"Help me... Help meee..."

He could once again hear the voice that had fallen silent for a time. Each time he heard the pleading voice that seemed to curse him, he felt as if needles of ice were planted in his back.

"Don't stop. Climb."

"Climb..."

He pulled out a block on instinct. His shoulders were heavy. Sweat dripped into his eyes. It stung horribly, like a wound that'd had salt rubbed into it. His vision blurred, the grip of his fingers loosening, but he couldn't wipe his hands. *Dammit. Why is this happening to me?*

"Just a little further. There's enough space here for you to take a breather. Just stick with it until then." It was the sheep's voice.

Just a little further. If it was just for a little bit longer, he could endure it. Wiping the teary eyes into which sweat had dripped, he could see the sheep several feet above him. Just as the sheep had said, there was a level, landing-like area amidst the levels of blocks that were stacked into a pyramid. If he could make it there, it seemed as though he would be able to have a short rest. Summoning the last of his strength, Freddie began to push.

"Good. Just a bit more."

The sheep reached out his hand. Freddie extended his own right hand in an attempt to grab onto it, but a sudden tremor ran through the block wall.

"I won't forgive youuuuuuuuu!"

A woman's shrill scream echoed loudly, causing the wall to resonate. It swayed slowly from side to side, but it was enough to knock Freddie off balance. The hand that had been just out of reach grasped empty space, fissures appearing at the same time in the block he was standing

on. His eyes momentarily met the sheep's, and Freddie discerned the hopelessness in its face.

He felt his body floating, then suddenly being dragged downwards. He fell. Falling, falling, falling, falling, endlessly falling. Along with a scream like a slender thread, Freddie plummeted into the depths of the abyss. His vision went completely black, the next moment exploding into deep crimson.

**GAME OVER**

He sat up with a start. His pyjamas were damp. The room was dark. The only light was the blue glow from the tank where he kept his tropical fish. Brushing off the blanket, he fumbled around for the remote that controlled the lighting. Lighting a white light that symbolised tranquillity, Freddie finally felt at ease.

"A... dream...?"

What a horrible dream. It felt somewhat eerie, but however hard he tried to recall the details of it, they simply melted away like the fleeting first frost of the year.

"Hn...."

The woman sleeping beside him turned over. He could smell something citrus mingled with the faint smell of alcohol. His nostrils prickled at the woman's scent, and Freddie let out a big sneeze.

"What?"

The woman awoke. Brushing back her long blonde hair in irritation, she looked at Freddie with unfocused, grey-green eyes. Her eyes, which reminded him of a thick forest, gradually began to focus.

"Morning."

Glancing at the clock hanging on the wall, he saw that it was after ten in the morning. *It's too late to be saying good morning,* Freddie thought, and an instant later was pulled right back down to earth.

"Dammit. I'm late."

As he got out of bed to change, his foot caught on a wine bottle lying on the floor and he tripped. The tongue of the black cat on the label stuck out, almost as if scorning Freddie. They had drained the bottle together the previous evening. Tipsy, he had put his arm around the woman's waist, the pair collapsing onto the bed. He didn't remember anything after that.

"What time is it?"

The woman's fingers crept over to the TV remote. Her green manicure was peeling off. The strap of her camisole hung from her shoulder, partially revealing a chestnut-like nipple.

*"I am currently at the scene of the accident."*

A reporter from the town's cable TV was displayed on the monitor. She wore a grey suit and held a microphone in her hand, standing in front of what appeared to be an intersection.

*"As I said earlier, the accident occurred at around 12:20 this morning. A pedestrian on her way home was hit by a truck that ignored a red light whilst making her way over the crossing, sustaining serious injuries."*

There was yellow tape reading *KEEP OUT* behind the reporter. He could see police officers managing the traffic scattered amongst curious onlookers.

*"The woman was taken to a nearby hospital, but was pronounced dead just after 1AM. Her identity is as yet unconfirmed, but an official at the hospital has commented that she was in her early twenties, had red hair and an ear..."*

"Turn it off, would you?" Freddie asked the woman, but, unable to wait, took the remote and turned the TV off himself. The nightmare he couldn't remember and his lateness had him flustered. "Shouldn't you be on your way, too? You have a deadline, right, Stella?"

"Ugh. I guess so..."

The woman called Stella let out a small yawn, then took off her camisole and tossed it to the floor, displaying her round, shapely bosoms and shaking them as if to show off.

"I'm gonna use your shower."

"Don't use too much shampoo. There's not much left."

"I'll just buy more later."

Stella went into the bathroom, and the sound of the shower drifted out. She cheerfully began humming the tune of *Hotel California*. Without listening to her unskilled singing, repeating just the hook over and over, Freddie quickly made preparations to leave. As he dressed, he tossed his laptop and phone into his bag. He couldn't forget the data for that afternoon's planning meeting, either. Spending the whole night with Stella meant that he hadn't had time to make any alterations.

"Look at you, showing up late on the day of such an important meeting. If that's how you feel, maybe I should give you a few more days of holiday."

The sarcastic face of his boss showed in his mind's eye and he tutted. The instant he did so, a button popped off of his shirt.

"Fuckin' thing."

It was still only morning, and the day was looking crappy already. From the moment he had woken up, the unrest in his heart hadn't settled.

He rummaged through his closet in search of a new shirt. With a clatter, a framed photo fell from where it had stood on the middle shelf. It showed Freddie with his arm around Stella's shoulders. It had been taken at the amusement park in the neighbouring town, back when they had only just met. They stood on a green lawn. Behind them was a large ferris wheel, and an endless blue sky. Their awkward smiles were filled with a calm happiness, in stark contrast to the way Freddie was prone to twitches these days.

Feeling as if he had seen something he shouldn't have, he put the photo face down and took out a shirt. As he finished changing into it, Stella came out of the bathroom. All she wore against her pale, naked body was a bath towel. Her long hair had been wrapped up in a towel, and she was surrounded by a cloud of warm steam. Her lips were the colour of garnet. She exuded a womanly smell all over.

Just a month prior, his tongue would surely have crept between those lips. Perhaps even last night he had done it without hesitation; he vaguely recalled the rough, comfortable sensation of it. This morning, however, it was no good. Freddie hurriedly averted his eyes. For some reason he didn't understand himself, the action was a startling one.

"What's wrong?" Stella asked, being alert enough to notice. It was always the women like Stella who would play the fool to entice men, and then be on the ball at times like these.

"It's nothing," Freddie replied mechanically. "Just hurry up and get changed and go, would you? I've gotta go straight to work."

"I've got a key. Can't I just take it easy for a bit?"

"I don't want you to."

He didn't mind sharing a room with her—if anything he welcomed it, especially on nights when the world was sound asleep. But he didn't want her doing her own thing when he wasn't around. It wasn't that he didn't trust Stella; instead, it was an unpleasant feeling that appealed to him on a more instinctive level. A woman invading his own private world—he didn't like that at all.

Shaking off the vision that threatened to dazzle him, he shook his head and forced it out of his body. It was like a deep black that ruptured and exploded with an electric crackle.

"Just hurry up and change."

Ignoring Stella as she tried to dry her hair, he gathered up her cast-off underwear and clothes and thrust them towards her.

"Fine, I get it." Stella pouted, but her grey eyes glinted as if she had suddenly changed her mind. "Hey. Listen to me instead. I came up with a good idea when I was in the shower."

"Tell me about it later."

"You know about Rapunzel, right? You know, that fairytale."

"No idea."

*Is she listening to what I'm saying? Why the hell are we chatting about fairytales when I'm about to be late? Get eaten by an old witch or something.*

Freddie roughly thrust his wallet into his pocket, then pointed at the face of his watch. Stella, however, didn't notice. Perhaps due to her writer's blood being in a frenzy, she was lost in her own ideas.

"Long, long ago, there lived a princess. An evil witch shut her up inside a tower..."

She had been complaining about not being able to come up with anything for the job she'd been given recently, but she must finally have run out altogether. Fairy stories weren't exactly what one would expect in a horror novel for adults.

"The princess, never having gone outside, was visited by a prince. Seeing her peeking out from a window in the tall tower, he fell in love with her at first sight. He decided that no matter what it took, he was going to climb that tower."

"If you want to talk, you can do it to yourself as much as you like."

He was reluctant to leave Stella behind, but had no choice. He grabbed his bag and left.

*Dammit. The sky's so bright today.*

"Wait up. This is where it gets good."

"I don't care. Come on. Go straight home once you're done changing."

As if to cut off Stella's voice, Freddie shut the apartment door.

✤

Fowles Electronics was located in a spot to the east of the town centre. They rented a floor of a multi-tenant building, and, including contractors, had a total of roughly 60 employees. In this town, with no industries particularly worth boasting about, it was known as an upright medium-sized business.

The company was in the business of developing game software. They did not, however, have the strength necessary to create, distribute and market the software on their own, so they primarily assisted with the programming of things such as cabinets to be installed at amusement parks and mobile applications.

Freddie, coming out of the meeting room that was partitioned off on one corner of the floor, returned to his seat and slammed down the documents.

"Gotta be fuckin' kidding me."

Harsh words emerged from his mouth. A man who had been staring intently at the PC next to him stopped working and looked up.

"What's up? Did the planning meeting go badly?"

"Understatement of the century."

He sat down roughly in his seat. Opening his desk drawer, he took out a small bottle containing supplements. He took out three orange pills, gulping them all down at once with some mineral water. The label read *Vitamin C to make your stress melt away,* but was it true? It felt like he had only been growing more and more stressed lately.

"This is all his fault."

"You went at it with Daryl again, huh? You don't learn, do you?"

The other man chuckled like a toothless old woman. Georg Valença. A programmer. He was a man of Polish descent who had joined the company six months or so earlier. Despite only being in his twenties, he was fond of phrases preferred by older people, and Freddie secretly called him "the old witch".

Having a programmer's disposition, he disliked people. He wasn't the most approachable of people, but he was nothing when compared to their boss, Daryl.

"This was his goddamn proposal to start with, and out of nowhere he just goes and changes direction like that."

Designated by Daryl, Freddie had spent about a month now working on a proposal for a downloadable mobile game. He recalled Daryl's words.

"Fortune-telling is a guaranteed hit. Make the game about horoscopes, and while you're at it, make it into something where we can come up with downloadable items we can charge money for. I'll get together some bigwigs next month and have a planning meeting about it. Get it done quick, yeah?"

Since that day, he had been stuck in an endless cycle of overtime and late nights, and it had been only yesterday when he had finally submitted his finished proposal.

"Nice. You did a good job. You've earned a rest."

He hadn't actually looked through it properly yet, but he didn't care. He'd never expected much with regards to Daryl's ability to judge games. All he wanted was for him to sign off on the proposal.

That had led to today. It wasn't great that he had been late, but he had somehow made the meeting in time. All of a sudden, the situation had changed to one where all he had to do was explain the game to the management and wait for the green light. One of the executives, who seemed

to be around fifty, looked through the documents that had been handed out and spoke up.

"Horoscopes seem a little mundane, don't you think?"

"Not in the slightest." Freddie shook his head. He was quiet by nature and didn't relish talking to people, but, not wanting to have wasted all of his efforts up until this point, gave his earnest rebuttal. "The game uses a brand new program based on the movements of the planets as researched independently and analysed by the developers, and extensively utilises a minutely detailed system that is leagues above any other company's software, and we will make sure that the customers will be satisfied with it."

Stringing together random words as he came up with them, the execs shut their mouths as if bowled over by his passion. *Good. Just shut up,* Freddie prayed silently. *Don't say anything you don't need to. All you really care about anyway is the length of the lines on the profit forecast's bar chart, isn't it? Just give your consent and hand over the budget, and we'll make a game out of it. You'll earn some cash out of it, too, and I'll get my wages. We'll all be happy.*

"Are there any other questions?" He looked around at the VIPs. They all simply sat with folded arms, apparently having no further concerns to raise. "In that case, I'd like to hear the final judgement on the proposal from the president..."

He made it this far, speaking rapidly, when Daryl—who had until this point simply been going along with it, not saying a word—began to conspicuously flatter the VIPs.

"How about it, Freddie? If Mr. Managing Director Packard says it's so, why not take it back to your department for a bit and take another look at it?"

What the hell was wrong with him? In that moment, Freddie truly wondered if the unsightly middle-aged man with too much gel smeared through his hair was an alien from another planet. What kind of boss got in the way of his employees' work?

Provoked by Daryl's words, the employees who had so far remained silent began to speak up, as if a dam had burst.

"To be honest, I don't have the slightest interest in it."

"Aren't horoscopes out of date? My daughter doesn't believe in them at all."

"It won't work. We can't win the industry war if we can't come up with something that the youngsters will like."

*What are these idiots talking about? Give me back all of the hours I've spent on this shit.*

The meeting continued on this way, no one heeding Freddie's screams.

"Let's send this one back, then. Good work."

Freddie listened to the president's decision as if he were speaking to someone else. The word *why?* swam inside his head.

Suddenly, he had a vision of a sheep plunging from a tower. A pain shot through his head, as if a drill had been driven into it, and he massaged his temples.

The big shots made their exit, making the meeting room seem twice as large, and Daryl gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder. "What a shame. Well, there's always next time. Don't let it get you down."

He couldn't have come up with any emptier words had he tried. Without giving Freddie a chance to respond, Daryl followed after the president. *I wish* he *would fall*, he casually thought, cursing Daryl as he stooped over in servility.

"What do I mean, 'fall'?" He didn't understand the meaning of the words he himself had muttered. "My head hurts."

His legs suddenly feeling unsteady, Freddie clung to the edge of his desk.

✤

"...So that's how it went. Goddamn opportunist. I'll make him regret it one day." After telling Georg what had occurred during the meeting, the anger surged back up within him.

"I guess this means you'll have to rework the proposal."

"Yeah, it does. Jesus. I even did unpaid overtime for this. Screw him."

Freddie banged on the desk, but all it did was cause himself pain.

"I guess this means I won't have any work for a while."

Georg was a member of Freddie's development team. The company was partitioned off into a variety of divisions such as development, general affairs and accounting. He and Freddie were in development. There were further groupings of desks for teams within the development division, primarily composed of four kinds of role: planner, programmer, CG production and producer. The number of people in the teams would grow and shrink depending on the scale of the game that was being worked on, but there was generally an average of six or seven people on each. Since Freddie's team was not yet officially working on a project, only Freddie and Georg had temporarily been assigned to it.

And how annoying Georg was. The man had made his name as a programmer by flattering his bosses and being good at subsisting.

"If there's nothing for me to do, I suppose I'll be off for today."

Georg put his machine into sleep mode and began his preparations to go home. As programmers worked on flexi-time schedules, they could generally go home whenever they wanted to. At first glance it may look like an easy profession, but, due to being trapped in the office for days on end when deadlines approach, it evens out in the end.

"Huh? You're goin' home?" Freddie grumbled, an image of Stella appearing in his mind's eye.

*Did she go home in the end? Is she still sitting around nonchalantly, treating my house like her office?*

"I wanna go home, too." He'd have to buy some body wash later.

"You only just showed up late. I don't think that will fly." Georg chortled. "And anyway, it looks like someone's here for you."

Freddie glanced at his PC monitor and saw that the icon indicating the arrival of a new company email was blinking. Clicking it with his mouse, he saw that the sender was Daryl. It said, *Come here. I need a favour.*

"Why can't he just say it out loud?"

Daryl's seat was right underneath his nose. He could shout to him and be heard, and yet irritatingly would insist upon sending emails. When he was around the president his tongue would wag as if freshly oiled, but he did not believe that he should be carelessly speaking with his subordinates. According to the testimony of a colleague, he had apparently said while out drinking that this was because it made him seem more commanding and dignified. What a joke.

Glancing over at his seat, Freddie saw that he was pretending to enthusiastically read an economic magazine, as if he hadn't summoned Freddie at all.

"What a moron. Should I pretend not to have noticed?"

"If you do that, he'll just start up with the sarcasm again."

"Don't have a choice, then, do I? I guess this is part of the job, too."

"Well, I'll be off now. See you tomorrow."

Putting his hands on his hips and hunching his back, Georg left. His chronic lower back pain seemed to be particularly bad lately. Back pain and stiff shoulders were the occupational hazards of being a programmer. Gastroenteritis was the planner's. It always plagued

Freddie, and these days he even had a headache to go along with it.

"You wanted to see me?" He approached Daryl, working hard not to let his emotions show.

Daryl set the magazine down on the edge of the desk, still spread out, and shot a glance at Freddie through his glasses.

"What a shame that was earlier. Don't let it get you down." He repeated the words, as if they were all he knew. Feeling as though it would be foolish to reply, Freddie stood in silence. "So, uh..." Daryl cleared his throat purposely, as if unsure what to do, looking up at Freddie with deliberately linked hands as if in prayer. "I know this is sudden, but I'd like you to come up with a new proposal."

"A new one? You mean I'm not going to be reworking the astrology one?"

"No good will come of you dirtying your hands trying to make something of that proposal now. The president is placing his faith in our abilities. We have to come up with a more revolutionary idea to win back his trust."

*You're the one who lost it in the first place.*

He barely managed to stifle the grumble as it threatened to spill from his mouth. Instead, he let out a short cough.

"What is this new proposal, then?"

"What are you talking about? It's your job to come up with that, isn't it? You can't go around acting like a newbie forever."

"..."

He fought to keep his trembling fist hidden in the desk's shadow. *Calm down. There's no point getting pissed off at a moron. Morons should just fall from the tower.*

Daryl the 'moron,' unaware of what Freddie was thinking, proudly resettled his glasses on the bridge of his nose.

"I'll lend you my wisdom this time, though. What do you think about a virtual dating sim game, hm?"

"What's that?"

"There are things like virtual idols and all that, right? Games where you can use your phone to have a make-believe romance with your favourite heroine are apparently all over the place overseas. We can't sit around without jumping on the bandwagon, can we?"

Perplexed by the sudden comments, he spied an article about Japanese-made romance simulators in a corner of the economic magazine. He must have been suckered in by the headline saying that young people were addicted to them. He was amazed by how simplistic it was.

"Are you sure it would work out?"

He spoke ambiguously. *He* might have conveniently forgotten about it, but it was Daryl who had been so strongly in favour of the new astrology game at last month's departmental meeting. That must have been inspired by the media, too.

"I'm not sure they'll go for a rehash..."

"What do you mean? You can make anything look new; it's all down to the appearance. *Presentation* is what really matters, *presentation*."

Yes. He'd forgotten that whenever Daryl heard a critical opinion from an underling, he would become more and more stubborn. He tutted mentally.

"Anyway, there's no time. I've told the president that we'll redo the planning meeting in a week from now. I'd like you to submit a proposal before then."

"You don't think a week is a bit short?"

"I'm thinking of you when I say this. If you mess up this time, I see a very dark future in store for you. Work hard and give it your all so that doesn't happen. That's all."

Daryl forcibly brought the conversation to an end. *If we get tossed out on the streets, I'll have your head as well as mine,* Freddie vowed.

✤

He didn't end up working at all that day. He tried browsing through the websites of some companies who developed romance simulation games, or whatever they were called, but couldn't come up with any creative images. All he could think was, *Where's the fun in getting together with a woman?* and couldn't figure out what would make the game enjoyable. Even if he were to show the users convenient, imaginary women unlike the irritating, troublesome women the real world was crawling with, who wanted to waste their time and money on one of them?

He was only half serious with Stella himself. Just like the other women he had been skin-on-skin with, he was simply dating her in order to sate his primal desires, and she must have known it.

"God, this is boring. Maybe I should pack it in for today."

He checked the clock, seeing that the hands had ticked past 6PM. Daryl had left long ago. It looked like he had accompanied the president to some kind of party. Even sycophants seemed to fit in there. Freddie was grateful not to have to look at his sarcastic face any longer.

Freddie put his PC into sleep mode and stood up. The neighbouring development team, in the face of next month's deadline, had entered crunch time mode. He pitied the shrieks and bellows from their last spurt of work, but was also envious. At this rate, there was no guarantee that his spot would still be there next month. It was better to have hard work than to have no work at all.

Hearing energetic conversation from behind him he sighed, punched his time card and went outside.

"Brr."

He turned up the collar of his coat. The weather had been strange this year since the spring. Downpours. Tornadoes. Intense heat. Even though the coming of winter was still a way off, a thin layer of ice formed on top of the lake at the park once night fell.

The silvery light of the waxing moon shone down. It looked like a pockmarked face sneering down at Freddie, set in front of a blue curtain.

"Dammit."

He kicked away an empty can in frustration. The flattened cola can struck the gutter and rebounded, causing a crow that had been scavenging through the rubbish to fly away, startled.

He took out his phone and searched for Stella's number. Despite hardly being a best-seller, Stella was an author by trade. She might be able to give him some ideas with her own interpretation. That morning, she had been talking about some kind of fairytale. Maybe he might ask her how the rest of the story went, just as reference. But...

His finger hovered over the call button. He couldn't help but be hesitant about seeing her for two days in a row. If he called her, there was no way it would end there. He would end up eating with her, then going back to his apartment and showering. After that, he could see things progressing the way they usually did.

Stella really was the ultimate woman in terms of letting out his sexual urges, but he didn't want her in his house any more than she had to be. He had only just managed to make it peaceful, and he didn't want a woman reeking of make-up coming in and messing it up.

In the end he didn't call her, stuffing the useless phone back into his coat's inner pocket. Still, he didn't feel like going straight home. Fragments of the planning meeting ran through his head, increasing his irritation to the point where he thought he might throw up. He didn't think he would be able to get to sleep without a drink tonight.

Suddenly, he found himself walking in the opposite direction from his apartment. Passing through gaudy neon side streets, he turned west at a construction site and two blocks later found himself in front of an establishment.

The Stray Sheep. It was a bar he had come upon recently by chance. He had never been inside but, despite its location, it seemed to have quite a number of patrons. In this town, without any proper form of amusement, what was there to do besides stay home playing games or drink? And games were a pile of shit. That left only one choice.

He opened the door as if drawn in. The bell attached to it let out a sound like the rattling of teeth inside a skull. The interior, swathed in dark brown, was lit with calm lighting. For Freddie, however—who had been walking through a dimly-lit world—it seemed bright enough to burn his eyes.

"Welcome," a man standing on the other side of the bar said in salutation.

Was he the owner? His silver hair was combed back, his white tuxedo and black sunglasses leaving an impression and making him feel strangely unsettled.

"Oh, my. Is this your first time here?"

There was a jokey hint in his elegant voice. It was the kind of voice that seemed to envelop all of the world and everything in it in a sense of black humour.

He slid into an empty seat at the bar. "Gin and lime."

"Yes, yes. Coming right up." He played the fool as he took his order.

Still, he was obviously skilled, plopping ice cubes into an old-fashioned cup, pouring in dry gin and lime juice and stirring, decorating it with a green lime once it was ready.

He took a sip of the proffered cocktail. He wasn't a heavy drinker, but drank down almost half of it in a single gulp. The cold, sweetly acidic liquid trickled down his throat, gradually warming it. It felt like his body was burning from the inside, but it was this pain that Freddie had been seeking. Abusing his body like this allowed him to fall into a thoughtless sleep.

"Is there something on your mind, sir?" the barman asked, peering at him. He reflexively leered back, and the

man put his hands out in front of him as if flustered. "Goodness. I didn't mean to pry. Yes."

"Hmph. Whatever."

Freddie drained the remaining contents of the glass and turned around, looking around the bar. There was no one else at the counter, but he could see several groups of patrons seated at the inner tables. Looking at their clothing told him at a glance that they were from the area. What would tourists want with a dump of a town like this, anyway?

"Where's the bathroom?"

"Down there on the left. Yes."

The drunkenness flooded him faster than he had anticipated. He staggered unsteadily towards the restroom, bumping into a man who had just come out.

"Watch where you're going."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

The other man bowed his head, flustered. Much like Freddie himself, he was a sullen man in his early thirties with black hair like a bird's nest, wearing a white leather jacket. However you looked at him, there was no way he was a normal salaryman. Just like Freddie, he reeked of someone who stood out from the crowd.

"Hey, Vincent. What're you up to?" one of the similarly-aged men sitting at the bar, apparently the man's companions, called. One of the men, wearing a red hat, was flourishing a folded bank note. They must be gambling.

"Sorry. I'm comin' now."

As the man called Vincent passed him, Freddie took his place in the restroom. After taking a piss, he turned on the tap at the sink and washed his face, clearing his head a little.

"I wouldn't be so sure."

"What?"

He looked up, feeling as if he had heard a whisper, but, of course, no one was there.

"Shit. Am I drunk?"

To get drunk after a single cocktail meant that he couldn't take nearly as much as he used to. When he was young, he could drink until the sun came up without a problem.

It seemed like a good idea to get some fresh air. He pushed the door open, excusing himself to the barman and heading for the exit. His legs began to drag, and he staggered.

"Hey, are you okay?" The man called Vincent he'd just met supported him. "You look like shit. Why don't you rest up at our table?"

"No. That's not necessary."

He waved him off, but his knees collapsed under him with the next step he took.

"Come on, over here."

"Sorry."

Usually, he would rather die than accept someone else's help, but tonight he decided to quietly go along with it. After all, he was quite drunk, and the sullen man did seem like a good person.

He let Vincent help him into a seat. Sinking back into the chair, he felt considerably more relaxed.

"Should I order a mineral water?"

An Asian man sitting across from him glanced at him with concern. The red-hatted man beside him concentrated on counting out his money as he watched the large TV screen on the other side of the counter. It seemed like a women's wrestling show was broadcast at this time. Two women clad in risqué bikinis were locking up on the screen. The one with long hair straddled the other, wrapping her arms around her neck and squeezing. There was a scream and then a roar, followed by cheers. The vividness of her pale, exposed skin made him feel sick again, and Freddie casually averted his gaze.

"You… don't look much like a gambler."

The red-hatted man introduced himself as Orlando. The Asian man was Jonny. They both seemed to be Vincent's friends.

"There's usually another guy called Toby with us, but unfortunately he's got a cold today. You don't have anyone with you?"

"Nah. I like drinking by myself," he said, but didn't feel like getting up right away. Maybe the vague sense of distance between Vincent and the others fitted with Freddie's preferences.

Neither too close, nor too distant. These men knew the principles of companionship.

"I'm Freddie. I make boring games for a boring games company."

The flow of the conversation gave him no choice but to introduce himself. Most people would look at him with suspicion or misplaced envy when they heard that he made games, but the three of them reacted in a different way.

"Well, all jobs are boring as hell, right?"

"There are no easy jobs."

"That's why we've gotta drink like this."

His attitude—as if he somehow got by in life by going with the flow, rather than philosophising about it—was relieving. Perhaps that was why he so easily opened up about his troubles. The way he had to conjure up a proposal for a game within the space of a week. That he might be fired if he didn't. Half of it, naturally, was the alcohol's influence.

"Fuck my scummy boss for forcing all of this work onto me. He can go straight to hell."

"A game about dating? Isn't that your area, Vincent?"

Jonny tilted his water towards Vincent. It seemed like Vincent was a systems engineer, too. Their employers and job types differed, but the fact that they both worked with computers filled him with a sense of familiarity.

"Unfortunately, I don't have any experience with that kind of game."

"Huh. You're so useless," Orlando complained and fiddled with the brim of his hat, then clicked his fingers as if a lightbulb had gone off. "Although... if it's a dating game you're making, I guess you have plenty experience with *that* kind of thing."

"'That kind of thing'?"

"*This.*" He stuck out his little finger suggestively.

"I won't deny it, but I can't stand women. Fundamentally... no, absolutely."

"Quite the guy, aren't ya?" With an expression of disbelief on his face, Vincent tipped ash from the cigarette he held. Both envy and sympathy showed in his eyes. "I don't think I could ever leave my girlfriend, in the end."

Oh. So he had a woman. What a shame for him, being caught up with a woman. He felt pity for the man, who seemed like a good guy.

"Well, you've gotta have a lot of experience with romance if you're making a game about it. I know. How about this? Call it *Saucy Housewife Conquest*."

"Stop screwin' around."

Even disgusting Jonny wasn't enough to put Orlando off. Seemingly absorbed in his idea, he banged on the table as he argued his case.

"No one gives a damn about innocent romance these days. The assholes of the world want more exciting encounters and relationships than that. Why don't you try making that kind of game?"

"I'll give it a think." He nodded with a wry smile.

"So, what kind of girl is your type?" Orlando asked out of curiosity.

"I don't have a type," he said, casually dodging the question.

"What? You must have one. Okay, fine. Let's talk about *his* type first." Orlando tapped Vincent, who sat next

to him, on the shoulder.

"Why do you have to make this about me?"

Shrugging off Vincent's annoyance, Orlando began painting a picture of the kind of woman he liked.

"Blonde, for starters, and fair-skinned; also, she's gotta be pretty young. You like a touch of devilishness too, right?"

"I never said any of that."

Vincent sulkily took a gulp from his glass, but seeing him not totally refuting the statement made Freddie think that Orlando's views were pretty much dead on.

"Hey, Vincent," Jonny cut in, amazement on his face. "Isn't that nothing like your girlfriend? Won't she be pissed if she finds out?"

"I told you, I never said any of that. Cut it out, Orlando."

Vincent pushed down on Orlando's head through his hat. They really were good friends. But... right. So that was Vincent's type, huh? Thinking that it might come in handy somehow, Freddie decided to make a mental note of it.

✤

He was stuck in a work-shaped rut. All he had managed to write was one line at the top of his open Word document: "New proposal. (Innovative) dating sim." He had sat from morning until night groaning away in front of his desk, and this was all he could come up with. How pathetic.

He had researched just what these so-called dating games were like on the internet, and had pretty much got the gist of it. A female character would be displayed and a variety of choices given to the player, their selections altering internal parameters. By repeating this a prescribed number of times, they would receive an ending reflecting their final parameters. It was silly. The design and program themselves were fairly simple, so even Georg would surely have an easy time coding one.

The problem was what kind of approach he should take with it. Shaping the game's background, setting, and the all-important cast—all of these would need to be relatively appealing if they were going to attract the attention of fickle players and entice them to fork over their cash.

Many of the existing titles involved office or school romances, but he could already hear the rejections coming from the next planning meeting if he simply re-appropriated one of these. Talentless execs tended to unconditionally worship empty words like "innovation" and "originality".

"Jesus, this is dull."

He stuffed a supplement into his mouth. Yet another night of unpaid overtime. Daryl and Georg had left long ago at the usual time.

His phone beeped. It was a message from Stella, asking if he would see her tonight. He thought for a moment before typing out a reply. *Sorry. I have overtime tonight. Some other time.* Then he added another line. *Anyway, you should be working, yourself. Isn't your deadline approaching?* That would do. He pressed 'send' and shoved the phone into his pocket.

"Well, I guess I should at least think of what characters to have in it."

What was the standard kind of situation in which you would meet a woman? An office romance would be an impossibility at *his* workplace, at least. Almost all of the employees were men, and the only biological woman to speak of was the old cleaning lady.

In the end, all he could think of was a bar. That was actually where he had met Stella. Seeing her drinking alone one rainy night, he had seduced her in a semi-overbearing manner. That day the woman he had previously been dating had only just up and left, and he was beginning to pine for the warmth of another. What he

hadn't planned on was his intended one night stand turning into such a long-lasting relationship.

"A woman at a bar, huh..."

He recalled the Stray Sheep he had dropped in on the previous day. There had been a red-headed waitress there. He considered basing the character off of her, but the image just wouldn't take shape.

"Not her, then, I guess."

He took out his sketchbook, letting his fingers take the pencil wherever they wanted. As an amateur painter, Freddie had a relative level of confidence in his drawing skills.

As he recalled his conversation with Vincent and the others, a portrait steadily took form in his head. Despite its roughness, it was clearly the image of a woman.

"Maybe this will do," he murmured to himself as he surveyed the finished drawing.

"Oh, are you by yourself?"

A woman's voice. For a moment, he wondered if the sketch was talking to him. *Don't be so stupid. That's impossible.* He shook his head and looked up to see an unfamiliar woman standing before him. She stared at Freddie with dubious blue eyes.

Her blonde hair was styled into curls on both sides, her plump, peachy lips alluring. Her white, underwear-like dress traced the lines of her curves closely, accentuating the cleavage that sat above a red ribbon fastened around her waist.

"Wha..."

He was speechless. Freddie's pupils contracted as if he had seen something unbelievable.

"I was told that I was gonna start work today, so I came here, but... where is everybody?"

"'Where is everybody'...? Who are you?" he asked, tearing his tongue from his dry lower jaw.

"I'm Catherine, a planner who's going to be working here now."

"Cather...ine...?"

The woman who called herself Catherine sat down in Georg's seat without invitation. As she crossed her long legs, he was afforded a momentary glimpse of her snow white thighs. Looking her over as if being sucked in, he finally came to his senses and hurriedly averted his gaze.

"Oh, uh. I hadn't heard. Like, for real?"

His heart began thumping at an impossible speed. It wasn't that he was excited by her sultriness. He glanced back at the sketchbook in his hand. However many times he looked, the outcome was the same. Catherine was a dead ringer for the rough sketch Freddie had drawn only moments earlier. What did it mean? He felt as if his fantasies had come to life.

Catherine brought her face closer to the perplexed Freddie. He felt her breath, feather-like, on the tip of his nose and swiftly lurched back in his seat, but Catherine was faster. She snatched the sketchbook from him.

"What're you looking at?"

"Give it back."

"What's this? Yikes, it looks just like me."

Catherine cackled as she looked at the sketch, which had to be a self-portrait. Rather than being creeped out, she seemed to find it amusing. After laughing for a while, she shot a flirtatious glance at Freddie.

"Could it be that you've taken a liking to me?"

"That's not it at all."

Then what *was* it? His head swam, blanking in his confusion.

"What's your name?"

"Freddie. Freddie McGoohan." His mouth moved of its own accord before he had time to think about it.

"Hmm. So you're called Freddie."

Catherine pressed her index finger to her lips, then tilted her head slightly as if lost in thought. The blue light

radiating from her half-closed eyes was coquettish enough to make him shudder. The moment her gaze fell on him, Freddie felt electricity shoot down his spine, his groin responding simultaneously. Panicking, he turned his chair around to conceal the bulge in his trousers, prostrating himself on the desk.

"So, is there something you need?" He intended the words to sound brusque, but his traitorous voice wavered slightly.

"I told you, didn't I? I came to work here, duh."

Catherine pouted, sticking out her bottom lip. Every little thing she did was alluring. He couldn't tell whether she was doing it unconsciously, or if it was all deliberate.

"Work? You must be on the team next door, then."

Today, too, a tense air drifted through the wall that served as a partition between them. It seemed as though a fatal bug had been discovered right before going gold, and the team were hard at work debugging. If someone had been dispatched in a situation like this, they must surely be assistance for the other team.

"Nope. I was told that you're starting work on a new game, so I should help out with the planning."

"By who?"

"What? That old guy with the greasy hair."

"Oh, Daryl?"

"That's the one. He said you were struggling by yourself, so I should lend a hand."

Freddie looked back at Catherine. Traces of youth lingered in her features. She must have graduated from college only recently. What would a little girl like her know about planning?

"Don't sweat it. I have quite a knack when it comes to games."

She puffed out her chest with pride. Seeing the recoil cause her soft-looking bust to wobble slowly up and down unsettled him anew. *God damn that Daryl. What a useless*

*asshole.* He mentally tutted. Even though the neighbouring team was in dire straits, he surely took one look at her body and decided to put her on his team in his lust. Filthy old bastard.

"Watch out for him, okay?"

"'Him'?"

"Daryl. He doesn't discriminate when it comes to young girls."

There were persistent rumours that a female university graduate who temped there had accused him of sexual harassment, but he let his money speak for him and they reached an out-of-court settlement.

"Hmph. You're worried about me, huh?" Catherine chuckled, Freddie finding it harder and harder to breathe. He doubled over, clutching at the left side of his chest. "Hey, Freddie, are you okay?"

"It's nothing... I'm just kind of tired."

"You should go home for the day, then."

"But I haven't finished working yet."

"You can start fresh tomorrow. Come on, I'll help you out. That's why I'm here, after all."

Catherine placed her hand gently on Freddie's back. Its chill, cool enough to make him shudder, gradually transformed into warmth. He could smell her honey-like scent through her clothing.

"I'll call you a cab. Where do you live?"

"..."

He felt as if he gave her an answer, but his mind was so hazy that he didn't know for sure. He stood, her kindly helping him to his feet, but couldn't remember what came after. The obvious question as to why a temp was suddenly showing up in the middle of the night never flitted through Freddie's mind again.

✤

Catherine's insides tasted like moist leaf mould. Inserting his tongue, she entwined hers stickily with his as if she wanted him, too. The air filled with heated sighs and the smell of sweat, Freddie mechanically acted on instinct alone.

Prickles of pleasure washed over him like waves and then retreated. It wasn't as though he went on because the feeling was pleasant; by now, he was no longer capable of stopping it.

"Freddie..." Catherine gasped.

His finger crept to her lips and a long tongue extended from within, pulling it in.

"Ooh. Mm."

Catherine repeatedly jerked her head back and forth. Sweet, viscous saliva clung to his finger as it went in and out. He couldn't see her expression in the darkness of the room, but vivid images of Catherine's face, frowning as she eagerly did her duty, flitted through his mind's eye.

"Catherine..."

Unable to restrain himself, he ran his tongue across her cheek. It felt like finest quality silk.

"Haha. You're so cute, Freddie."

To Freddie, she seemed like a little devil. The blanket wrapped around their naked bodies fluttered with each convulsion, looking almost like the wings of a bat.

He'd never been with a woman like her before. She wasn't an odorous, hideous leather bag like all of the others. She was far more terrifying, more alluring than any of them. He knew that she was the kind of woman he could lose himself in.

"Catherine, I..."

Catherine's voice. The moment he cast aside reason and gave in to his urgent desires, his mind blacked out without warning.

✤

He awoke to the sound of his alarm clock.

"Ugh..."

He rolled over and opened his eyes halfway. Freddie realised that he was lying on the carpet beside the bed.

"Was it a dream?"

He turned off the clock that sat on the sideboard and got up. The room was chilly. Catherine was gone. The bed sheets were dishevelled, but there were no traces of anyone other than Freddie having inhabited it. His house key was in the ashtray as usual, the door locked from the inside.

Enduring a dull headache, he drew the curtains and opened the window. The sky promised rain. Dark, ash-coloured clouds drifted swiftly past overhead. The sounds of construction from a nearby building site rattled his head, and he shut the window with a tut. Glancing at the clock, he saw that it was after 8AM. It was almost time to leave for another day of work.

"My head's killing me."

He thrust his hand into his pyjama pants and scratched his crotch. Suddenly feeling the need to relieve himself, he rushed into the bathroom. It flowed out endlessly, like water from a broken tap. Disgusted by the yellow liquid-filled toilet, he flushed it and returned to the room, when his phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Oh. It's me, Catherine." He fell silent at the sound of the familiar, husky voice. "What's wrong?"

"Uh... Nothing. I just had a weird dream..."

"Dream? Were you dreaming about me, by any chance?" A suppressed laugh, as if she was teasing Freddie, slipped out.

"The dream... Oh, right. You were in the dream."

"What, really?" The voice on the other end was excited. "Hmm. It's kind of embarrassing, but whatever."

"What?"

"I guess it makes me pretty happy that you would dream about me. Besides, I'm interested in hearing what you did with dream me."

"I-I, uh..."

"Noo, stop. I bet it was a weird dream, anyway." He could hear bashfulness in Catherine's voice. She shifted to a more serious tone. "Oh, so, about work—this afternoon isn't really great for me. I talked it over with Daryl, and he said I should come in at night."

"Shift work, huh?" Such irregular shifts were common in this industry, but not on only one's second day on the job. "Is something going on?"

"You could say that. So sorry, but could you wait for me again until I get there? I guess we have to have a meeting about the proposal, after all."

"Yeah, I don't mind."

It wasn't like he had anything to do at home. His proposal for the deadline was approaching, and Freddie had no reason to refuse.

"Great. See you tonight, then?"

Catherine said goodbye and hung up.

"..."

He stared absentmindedly at the 'disconnected' indicator. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't recall ever having given Catherine his phone number.

✤

As he made his way to work, he received a message from Stella. It said, *Can I see you today?*, just like yesterday's. *What a self-centred woman,* he thought.

Taking a shortcut to the office and cutting through the public park, he saw pigeons approaching him on the stone-paved path in search of food. He waved them away, but they made no move to flee. All they would do was eat and

then die, the idea of flying away never so much as crossing their minds.

"I'm not going to fall."

He was taken aback by the meaningless words that suddenly emerged from his mouth. What was it supposed to mean? Was he intending on flying through the air?

He looked up at the sky, filled with the same clouds the colour of lead. They blocked out the sun, making it as gloomy as if it were dusk.

"Hah, how idiotic."

He must be getting burned out. Perhaps he should start taking more supplements.

He sent a simple message in reply to Stella: *I have to work today. I'll let you know when I have the time. Sorry.* Not an ounce of guilt weighed upon his conscience. It was true that he had to work, and also that he had no time to spare.

Upon his arrival at the office he saw that for once, Georg had beaten him there.

"Look who's early."

After greeting him, he realised that the man was wearing the same clothes he had been wearing yesterday. Georg wasn't the type to pay particular attention to his attire, always wearing the same jacket and pair of jeans, but at least he usually changed his shirt and socks—and yet today, he hadn't.

"Did you stay the night at your girlfriend's place?" he said, intending it to come off as a casual joke, but was shocked when no protest was raised in response.

"Hmm, perhaps you might say that." He grinned, exposing his chipped front tooth. The wrinkles at the corners of his eyes despite his youth made him look all the more witch-like. Uncomfortable, even though he had been the one to bring it up, Freddie hastily tried to change the topic.

"What's Daryl up to?"

His boss should have been here by now, yet his seat remained vacant.

"He called earlier to say that he's taking paid leave. I hear it's the anniversary of his mother's passing."

"He's just using it as an excuse to skip work, obviously."

"I suppose you're right," Georg said with a shrug.

On any other day he would feel relieved to be able to get on with his work uninterrupted, but things were a little different today.

"I wanted to ask him where Catherine's supposed to sit."

There was just barely enough space in the narrow area divided by a partition to squeeze in the development team's desks. If he was going to set up a desk for her, they would likely have to move the partition. The look on Georg's face, however, was one of puzzlement.

"Catherine? Who on earth is that?"

"You haven't heard? She's a temp who was assigned to our team yesterday."

"I've never heard of her."

"She's a cute girl. Blonde, blue eyes."

*Not only that, but she's passionate, too,* he nearly said, but held his tongue before it could slip out. It should have been a dream—so why was the feeling of her engraved into his very core?

"Well, as long as the specification document gets written up, I don't mind whether it's you or Catherine who does it. How is work going, by the way?"

"I told you, I'll manage something. Just give me a little more time."

A sour look on his face, he took his seat. Only eight more hours until Catherine arrived. He booted up his machine in order to make some progress on the proposal, even if only a little. In the end, however, he didn't even manage to write a single sentence.

✤

Catherine made her appearance at exactly the same time as she had the day before. Just the sound of her shoes clicking on the floor as she approached drowned out the noise all around.

"Hiii, Freddie."

"Hey."

Just their casual exchange of greetings made Freddie's heart beat faster. What was happening to him? It wasn't like he was a middle school kid who'd never seen a woman before. He was flustered on the inside, but there was nothing he could do to calm its pounding.

"How far have you got, then?"

Catherine took the seat of Georg, who had already gone home, and peered over Freddie's shoulder at the screen of his computer.

"Oh, uh, this is..."

He tried to hide the screen, but it was too late. Catherine pointed at his still-blank Word document and let out an *I-told-you-so* sigh.

"You really are helpless without me, aren't you?"

"Don't be stupid. Anyway, I told you. That's Georg's seat."

"It's fine. I'll just be borrowing it at night."

"Hey, wait, who said you could do that?"

Georg hadn't breathed a word of this to him, and she surely couldn't go around using his computer. And yet Catherine tapped away at his keyboard with practised motions, correctly entering the password in no time at all.

"Aand there we go. I'll just put it all back the way it was when I leave." She stuck out her tongue and giggled.

"What the hell's up with you?"

"Hey, don't talk to me like that."

Catherine puffed out her cheeks, looking at him with upturned eyes. Just having those blue eyes staring at him was enough to spike his already unsettled pulse.

"Sorry, I just… that's not what I meant…"

"It's okay. Just for you, I'll let you talk to me however you like."

The corner of her mouth slightly tugged upwards as Catherine approached him, and he was drawn in by her cleavage. Her bosom bulged just the way they had in the dream.

"Heyy. Don't look at me like such a perv, Freddie." Catherine covered her breasts with her arms, her gaze full of curiosity. "So. What did I do in this dream of yours?"

Her breath was hot.

"Y-you didn't do anything…"

The more Freddie tried to argue, the more reluctant Catherine's face became.

Cheeks puffed out, she muttered, "I'd let *you* do whatever you wanted to me."

Seriously, what the hell was with her? He asked himself this over and over, but no answers came. All he knew was that he was powerless to resist her charms. Imagining himself as an insect caught in a spider's web made him feel a pleasantness towards his situation. He wanted that mouth to gobble him up.

*Moron. What's wrong with you?* Freddie shook his head firmly, and Catherine responded with sweet words.

"You really are tired, aren't you? It's okay. I'll do the rest for you." She spun her chair around to face the monitor, beginning to swiftly tap away at the keyboard. "Dating sims are so boring when they're generic, huh?"

She hummed as she put together the proposal. As he watched from the sidelines, harsh words such as *photographed in secret*, *stalker*, and *another man's wife* caught Freddie's eye.

"Hey, hold on a second. Exactly what kind of game are you making, here?"

"What do you mean, what kind? You said it's a dating sim, right?"

"What the hell does some Peeping Tom taking secret photos of people have to do with romance? We can't put crimes in it."

"Come on. That's not what I'm talking about at all."

Catherine frowned in displeasure. Slapping the keyboard violently, the screen was suddenly filled with a row of letters reading *XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX*.

"Stop that. You'll break it."

"It's part of the couple's *game*, duh."

"What?"

"We'll put in an event where if you get close to the girl in the game, you record yourselves getting it on. It's consensual, of course. The player can decide where to set up the camera, and you get to see them making love from all kinds of fun angles."

"Wait, is that a thing?"

"It's a game. What does it matter? Weren't you looking for an innovative new idea?"

"Yeah, I did say that, but..."

"Besides, there are couples who film their own love scenes like it's nothing these days."

"For real?"

A shiver ran down Freddie's back. It wasn't that he was annoyed at the thoughtless actions of the stupid couples; he simply couldn't understand the motivation behind wanting to keep a visual record of such an act. How could they record such a terrible, ugly, shameful part of the human existence when there was a chance that somebody else might see it? Just the thought of it made him tremble.

In actual fact, Freddie had never once so much as considered watching adult videos or anything of the sort, and most likely never would.

*My family. My room. A half-open door. And then...*

"What's wrong? You look kinda pale."

He realised that his forehead was covered in a sheen of sweat.

"Sorry. I guess I don't feel too well."

"You should go and get some rest. I'll take care of everything else."

"By that you mean the game, right?"

"What're you talking about? Of course that's what I mean."

"A game, huh. Well, if it's a game then I guess it could work..."

He forcibly decided that this would explain it. Once that had been settled, he began to feel as though Catherine's idea might work out after all.

"A *Peeping Tom Dating Sim*, huh? The hardcore fans might take to it."

He would probably have to tone down the depictions a bit when he showed it at the planning meeting, but the fools would surely go along with it so long as he pushed its novelty to the forefront. All he had to do was get the green light and have them hand over the money, and then the developers could do whatever they wanted.

If some kind of problem did come up, he would just have Daryl take the fall for it. If it sold well he would be widely lauded, and if it didn't then his hateful boss' head would roll. It was a win-win situation either way.

Feeling a dark sense of pleasure, he began to wonder if Catherine was perhaps his own Lady Luck.

"Hey. Why don't we go get a drink when you're done with that bit?" he asked hesitantly, but Catherine didn't turn him down.

"Sure, but weren't you feeling unwell?"

"I'll feel better once I get a drink down me. I'll buy you one as thanks for the proposal."

He decided to let his instincts decide what came next.

# Chapter 2

Opening a heavy door, he saw a red world unfurl before him.

"Where...?"

He passed through the door, the cool, thick air prickling his skin. He remembered it—the sensation; the world. The door shut behind him. Freddie leapt towards it, panicked. He turned the knob and pounded on the door, but it was never going to open.

"Doing that will get you nowhere," somebody's voice said. "Hurry and climb on up here. Unless you *want* to die?"

As his eyes grew accustomed to it, the extent of the world revealed itself to him. *Yeah. Of course.* He had wondered somewhere in his heart whether this had been the case. The tall wall of giant blocks piled high before his eyes. The moon suspended in a red sky. The sheep unsteadily, desperately clambering their way upwards. It was a continuation of the dream he'd had one day.

The door vanished, cutting off any path by which he might retreat. At the same time, he heard a strange moaning from behind. It wheezed an anguish-filled death agony. The cry, with mingled hatred and murderous intent, seared itself into Freddie's back.

"Aw shit..."

He was afraid even to turn around. The only way he could escape from 'it' was to climb to the top of the stone blocks in front of him. What if he fell as he climbed? As soon as the thought entered his mind, he felt as though ice water began oozing from his heart instead of blood. His eyes momentarily went dark, and he crouched down with

his head in his hands. His palm brushed against something hard.

"What's that?"

He could feel something unusual that wasn't hair on his head. It was gnarled and angular, twisting and tapered. A horn.

*a horn a horn a horn a horn a sheep's horn*

"Urgh!"

He snatched his hand away with a gasp. *What the hell what the hell. What the hell's something like this doing growing from my head?* His mind raced. His hands wouldn't stop shaking. He checked once more, timidly, but he hadn't been imagining it after all.

"Did I turn into a sheep?"

Then did that mean that the crowds of sheep scaling the wall were actually human, too?

"No way."

He didn't understand. He couldn't follow the rules of this world at all. Stranded in a situation that went beyond comprehension, Freddie almost sank to the ground.

"Get up. Sitting around here won't change a thing. You'll just end up doing the same thing every night."

It was the voice again—the man's voice he'd heard at some point in the past.

"Hurry up and get climbing."

"Where? Where are you?"

"Here."

His gaze wandered, stopping upon a sheep that clung to the wall to his upper right. Supporting his body with one hand, he looked at Freddie and waved with the other.

"It's still easy to climb over here. Hurry. Looks like it's noticed you."

*"Fre...ddie..."* came a voice from the dark abyss. *"Fr...eddie..."*

Thinking that an intense wind howled behind him, something leapt out, brushing against his face. It slammed

against the wall in front of him and rebounded. It was the burnt door of a car. Looking like it had once belonged to a truck, he could make out the words "Pleiades Transport" in letters blackened by heat and soot.

"What's that...?"

If it had scored a direct him on him, he would've been a goner for sure.

"Freddieeeeeeeee!"

The voice was more and more rage-filled. A presence approached. He could feel hard breathing whispering against his back.

"Shit."

Sensing that his life was in danger, he sprinted towards the blocks. Putting his hand on the bottom-most stone, he clung to its face by the tips of his fingers and pushed himself up.

"Don't leave me behiiiiiiiind!"

*Is this some kind of joke? I can't leave you behind if I don't even* know *you. Stop following me around.*

He desperately clambered up the blocks, somehow managing to make it to the sheep. Perhaps his previous experience had come into play, because he managed to climb quite a distance in a much shorter span of time. A landing where he could take a breather was just above.

"Christ."

His relief at being able to take a break was short-lived. An intense swaying began suddenly, and his hand that was clutching the block slipped.

"Shit!"

His fingers slid from the top of the block. Before he could get back into position, his body was dragged downwards. With no footing, he went pale.

"Look out."

Just before he plummeted, the sheep grabbed him by the arm. If he hadn't, it would've been a one way trip straight down into the abyss.

"Thanks."

"Relax. Don't look down."

The tremors grew even harsher, tossing Freddie, holding himself up by one arm, rattling from side to side like a pendulum. Screams flashed by as other sheep lost their balance and fell. He heard the groan of something giving way beneath his feet, floating in space.

"What?"

Despite the pointed warning not to look, he had to be sure. Beneath Freddie, the entire bottom-most row of stone blocks had disappeared. The ground on which he had been standing only moments before had vanished without a trace, leaving only an expanse of empty darkness in its wake. The earth let out a rumble and the next row crumbled, too, before being swallowed up by the chasm.

"Isn't this dangerous?"

The block wall had begun collapsing from the bottom. He had to climb it, and fast, before even this part was engulfed. The woman's cries echoed from the black hole.

"Freddieeeeeeeeee!"

"It's dangerous either way."

With the sheep's help, he secured his footing. By now, he no longer even had the time to catch his breath. He passed straight by the landing, beginning to climb even higher, when the sheep came to a stop and called out to him.

"Hold on."

"What the hell? If we don't hurry, you're gonna fall, too."

"We can't go any further."

"What? What the hell are you talking about!?"

Peering over the sheep's shoulder, he saw that the blocks ahead towered two levels high, and there was no way they would be able to get up there. The sides were the same way, meaning that they were essentially stuck at the bottom of an impassable cliff.

"W-what are we supposed to do?"

Even as he stood there in his confusion, the block wall continued its steady collapse. Before long, the abyss would be upon him.

"Don't panic. There must be a way."

In contrast to the flustered Freddie, the sheep thought calmly with his arms folded. Eventually his eyes sparkled, as if he had thought of something.

"Maybe we can pull these blocks out towards us."

"What did you just say?"

The sheep was pointing at the bottom-most stone of the two levels piled before them. He ran his finger along the area where the blocks connected, testing how they felt.

"Just as I thought. They move after all."

"Wait, for real?"

"I'll pull it out. You help." Prompted by the sheep, Freddie hurried over to assist. "Aaand..."

"Urgh!"

Combining their strength and tugging, they managed to move the stone towards them with even greater ease than he had imagined.

"This will do."

Pulling out the block had transformed the cliff into a set of stairs. By climbing up the bottom stone, then the top one, they would be able to move even higher up.

"You're quite something."

In spite of himself, Freddie muttered words of gratitude to the sheep. Without showing a hint of happiness, the sheep went straight back to his climbing. Freddie, too, hurried after him.

Just what was going on, though? Clinging to the stone, he turned his head. Seeing the sheep continuing to desperately climb upwards without knowing where they were headed, he couldn't help but wonder this himself.

The wall of slowly collapsing blocks, and the cliff that blocked his path. At first glance, survival seemed

impossible—and yet he couldn't shake the feeling that some way to get out of it, just like moments earlier, existed.

If there existed a being who had created this world, and their goal was to make all of the sheep fall, they would never have allowed them to take evasive measures in the first place. Or were they perhaps just enjoying the sight of the sheep struggling in their desperation?

It didn't feel like it, though. The sheep had certainly reduced in number quite a bit from the time when he first saw them, but a fair number had survived, too. If they could make it to the top, many of them—including Freddie himself—would probably be saved. Was this some kind of screening? One to separate the sheep who could survive from those who couldn't? Then...

*A cull.* The word that suddenly surfaced in his mind brought back previously forgotten chills. Such an ominous, dirty word. *Is someone trying to kill me?* He looked around him as if seeking an answer, but all he could hear was the muted irritation in the voice of the sheep who had continued on ahead.

"Don't hang about. I'll leave you behind."

"W-wait for me!"

As they scaled the block wall, changes began to occur to its orderly layout. Sometimes there were gaps here and there, and sometimes there towered cliffs like the one from earlier with nothing to grab onto. Each time they would move the blocks around to create a footing, frantically dragging out the stones. If they didn't, they would be able to go no higher.

"Another cliff, huh?"

And this time, it was three layers high. He pulled out the two blocks in front of him in order, required to form them into the shape of a pyramid.

"Hey, asshole. Get a move on, would you?"

As Freddie was working with the rosary sheep, a different sheep who had been standing helplessly in front of

the cliff was shoved in the back by yet another sheep who had shown up after. The shoved sheep staggered, knocking into the block next to him. Cracks began opening in the stone block he had just been using as a foothold, and it crumbled into a pile of dust. With nothing to stand on, the sheep fell with a cry. The scream lingered, becoming more feeble, and all he could do was look on until the sheep was no more than a tiny speck.

"Watch yourself. Some of these blocks are fragile."

At the words of the accompanying rosary sheep, Freddie reflexively crouched down. It wasn't going to make him any lighter, but his fingers were weak.

"What the hell is this place?"

He had only just figured out that he could get around by pulling out the blocks, a flicker of hope that he could escape blossoming within, and now *this*. If someone was watching over this world, they would have to be quite a spiteful person indeed.

The fall of one of the sheep sent shockwaves through the flock of sheep, who up until then had been momentarily calm. Some sheep ran off in a frenzy, while others crouched down and ceased to move entirely.

"Get outta the way, asshole."

The sheep climbed up towards Freddie. Drool dribbled thickly from his mouth, his eyes bloodshot and devoid of any hint of reason.

"If you don't move, I'll push you off."

"Cut it out, moron."

Looking as though he was going to be shoved blindly by the hands, Freddie desperately clung to the face of the block. If he was pushed onto the adjacent block, he might end up like the sheep from before.

"I'm trying to make a foothold. Just hang on for a minute."

"Shut up. You're in my way!"

There was no getting through to the sheep in his panicked state. He reached out his arms and grabbed onto Freddie's back, trying to pull him off of the block.

"Let go! Goddammit, let go of me!"

Desperately shaking free of his grip, he swiftly created a foothold and scampered up it. Prepared for the risk of slipping, he simply wanted to get away from the sheep. The sheep, however, pursued him with unbelievable speed, grabbing onto Freddie's leg from behind.

"Gah!"

His vision swung up, then down in an instant. He had been pulled down and slammed against the stone block. It was by good fortune alone that he had been spared from tumbling off it.

"You're not going ahead of me!"

Freddie, lying flat on his stomach, could hear the sheep's crazed yelling from behind him.

"Take it easy. You're gonna end up falling with me."

"I'm gettin' outta here. Let me outta here!"

He paid no attention to Freddie's attempts at persuasion.

"Bastard!"

Twisting around and shaking himself free of the sheep, Freddie got unsteadily to his feet. As he did so, the sheep tackled him.

"Woah!"

He wrenched his torso away, trying to avoid it, but ended up losing his balance instead, throwing himself against the side of the block with nothing beneath his feet. The fear of falling made his hair stand on end. Just before he fell, however, he just barely managed to cling onto the edge of the block. He felt as though he were hanging from a steep cliff.

The sheep who had launched himself at him was not so lucky. Losing his target upon being evaded by Freddie, he pitched forwards and fell from the block.

"Baa!"

Leaving a scream behind, the sheep vanished from view. Listening to the cry grow more and more distant as he plummeted, Freddie desperately climbed back onto the block. He sank to the ground and remained there for some time. He panted, his shoulders heaving. He now realised for certain that the horde of sheep was not on his side.

"So I can't trust anyone, then."

*Not even the guy who spoke to me first,* he thought, wiping the sweat from his brow. The high wall continued its ceaseless vibrations. It wasn't going to stop collapsing until he made it to the top—not to mention the voice that screwed with his head.

"Fr...e...ddie... Fre...ddie..."

"It's getting closer again."

*What the hell is that thing? It has some kind of grudge against me.*

"Freddie... Where are you...?"

"Shut the hell up!"

He wasn't just going to die here. There was still something he had to do.

"Get up. Get up and keep climbing."

Slapping his trembling legs, he went back to scaling the pyramid. The stone steps might look like they went on and on for eternity, but they had to end somewhere. Clinging to this belief, Freddie began to proceed.

✤

He could hear a bell in the distance. He thought he was hearing things at first, but the higher he climbed, the clearer it became. It had a clean, pure tone. As well as giving Freddie courage, it seemed to urge him to come closer.

"If I can just make it there..."

*Then I'll be okay,* he knew.

The peak of the block wall, which had been concealed by mist, revealed itself. A huge, golden bell hung, swaying, in a bell tower there. That was his goal. Several sheep already seemed to have made it there. He could make out the sheep who had called to him amongst them. His rosary glinted silver amidst the white fleece on his chest.

"Just a little further. Take it easy and come up here."

If he slipped now, it was all over. He moved deliberately, one step at a time, until finally he climbed up the last stone block. The summit resembled a balcony, wide enough for two cars to pass each other. Feeling solid ground beneath his feet for the first time in a while, he almost sank to his knees.

"Not yet. It's not over yet."

The sheep pointed. Until then, Freddie hadn't been able to see what lay beyond the wall of blocks he had scaled, but now that he was at the top he could finally see the other side.

"This..."

An unimaginable scene lay before him. The stone blocks actually formed a four-sided wall, with a gigantic castle towering at its centre. The fortress, solemn yet dignified, was made of obsidian and reminded him of a mediaeval gothic building. The stone walls had been carved out here and there with skylights set into them, through which seeped an eerie green light. Carvings of beasts, such as gargoyles and dragons, decorated the windows, with deep red rubies set into their eyes. They surveyed the area with a glare, as if on the lookout for any would-be intruders.

Four towers were clustered at the corners of the fortress, creating a direct connection between them by way of passages. Sharp ballistas peered out from bay windows in the towers, refusing to let anything approach.

"This is amazing."

Including the spires, the castle was far taller than even the stone wall, its peak fading high into the red sky, out of

sight.

"We might be okay if we can take refuge in that castle," the sheep muttered.

"But how?"

"Look." The sheep pointed at a section of space between the block wall and the castle. "You see that bridge over there?"

"What?"

He couldn't tell at first, but upon squinting his eyes the image gradually began to take shape. A narrow suspension bridge hung roughly ten yards to his right, joined to the side of the top level of the castle wall. Large, riveted double doors of iron stood on the other side of the bridge, with a gap in the middle just about wide enough for a sheep to squeeze through.

"We can cross that and shelter inside the castle. That's the only way we can survive."

Freddie began running towards it, the sheep taking the lead. The bridge extended for about one hundred yards. With vines serving as ropes and nothing below but wooden planks, it was even more risky-looking than he had imagined. It swayed unsteadily from side to side along with the sound of the block wall collapsing.

Perhaps worried about whether or not it could take their weight, the sheep were crossing one at a time. Hurried by the rosary sheep, Freddie joined the tail of the queue. It felt like forever as he waited for his turn. The block wall had begun to collapse right up to the point just below the summit.

"Freddieeeeee!"

That voice. The accursed woman's voice was gradually getting louder.

"It's your turn. Come on," called the sheep, who had already crossed the bridge, from by the fortress door.

By now, the suspension bridge was rocking wildly like a swing in midair—but there was no other way. Steeling

himself, he took a step. The flimsy wooden boards creaked ominously underfoot. *Please don't break on me,* he prayed silently, clinging onto the vines. He had made it about halfway across, when...

"Freddie... I've found youuuuuu!"

Something tentacle-like suddenly extended from the darkness immediately below. At its tip were five long claws, which were painted with peeling crimson nail polish.

"Don't leave meeeee!"

The claws brushed by Freddie, then came to a stop above him. They came down, carving a parabola in the air. The sharp nails effortlessly tore apart the planks and vines right in front of him. Tiny splinters of wood plummeted into the darkness.

With the vines on one side severed, the bridge leaned heavily. Freddie gripped tightly onto the vines on the other side, somehow managing to straighten himself up, but it didn't last for long. Reaching the limits of its endurance with the mid-section destroyed, planks began to fall from the bridge. The vine ropes that held it up, too, were stretched to their limits, and he could hear their fibres begin to split.

"Run. Run to me!" the sheep yelled from the other side.

He had no time to look back and survey the threat. Entrusting his life to the planks that could fall at any time, he began to sprint. His foot caught on the moist boards, causing him to stumble. Tears automatically sprang to his eyes. Boards he had only just passed over came off and vanished.

"Freddieeee!"

The tentacle reappeared, rearing up. He felt a murderous air from behind, but had no way of avoiding it. The wind howled, and he could feel something hurriedly approaching. Three more yards to the fortress gate, two, one...

"Shit!"

Pouring the last of his remaining strength into his feet, he jumped. Plunging headfirst to the ground, the eerie tentacle slid past overhead.

"Grab on!"

A protuberance suddenly stuck out from the castle wall. He grabbed onto the hand of the sheep who had been waiting right by the gate and stood, just as the suspension bridge collapsed and fell.

"That was close..."

His throat was dry as a desert. Even the cold sweat had ceased.

"The others have gone inside. We should join them," the sheep said.

The clawed tentacle that Freddie had so far evaded made an abrupt turn and began to attack.

"Look out!"

There was no time to shout a warning. It gripped the pitiful sheep in its huge fingers, dragging him down into the depths of the abyss. Freddie's eyes connected with the sheep's for a split second. Desperation, terror—and regret. Emotions surged through Freddie's mind, threatening to explode.

"Wait just a..."

By the time he had reached out his hand to stop him, the sheep had already vanished into the depths. *He gave his life for me?* he thought numbly.

"Freddie... Freddieeeee!" came the echo of the woman's voice, realising that she had captured the wrong prey.

"I... I..."

Still bewildered, his legs began to move on instinct alone. He passed through the gate, the heavy door shutting behind him, and then he lost consciousness.

✤

Georg was dead.

When he'd got the news from a colleague, Freddie wondered if he was still trapped in a nightmare.

"Why? Why did he die?" he asked in a voice that didn't feel like his own.

"I dunno. They found him cold in his bed."

"In bed!?"

Holding his phone between his chin and shoulder, pressed against his ear, Freddie looked down at his bed. It was cheap; just a metal frame, mattress and sheets. A blanket lay balled up on top of it, lying there like a piece of rubbish. Had Georg died in a bed like this one? He gently reached for his pillow. It was so cold that he couldn't believe he'd slept on it only the night before.

"What about the funeral?"

"I don't know anything specific. Just come to the office, would you? You're not high up enough to be taking paid vacations."

The hands on the clock had long since passed noon. He was *really* late. If a worried colleague hadn't told him about Georg, he might still be sleeping now. He announced that he was coming, then hung up the phone.

He washed his face in the bathroom, but still felt horrendous. He had slept for an unbelievably long time, but still felt exhausted. It was because of that weird dream. He couldn't remember much of it, but felt like he'd been in a high up place. He could still faintly hear the sound of a bell. Was it a church bell? He couldn't remember how it sounded. He couldn't help but feel like it had been melancholic, like a funeral bell.

"A funeral, huh..."

His tangled thoughts turned towards Georg's death. Why him? He hadn't said anything about being ill. Even after his recent check-up, despite complaining of back pain there hadn't been anything else out of the ordinary. He did sometimes mystify people with his unique manner of

speaking, but he was good at his job after all, and Freddie didn't dislike Georg.

*Dead? Him...?*

Reality seeped out of the tone of the room, making it appear sepia. It was an irritation to have to go into the office, but, thinking that he might be able to find out something new if he did, Freddie dragged himself out of his apartment on heavy legs. In contrast to his room, where it felt as if time had come to a standstill, the clear, blue noon sky was unpleasantly bright. Pain prickled through his head. *You have no right to be walking under such a beautiful sky after shutting yourself away in a gloomy world like that,* he felt as if he could hear the sun scorning him, and walked with his head down, averting his face from it.

Upon his arrival at the office, despite putting on casual airs, something definitely felt different from usual. Everyone sat facing their monitors as they worked as they normally did, but the atmosphere felt strained. People weren't whispering between each other as much as usual, either.

"Freddie."

Daryl looked up from his desk and glanced at Freddie. His hair, from which usually wafted the strong odour of pomade, was unkempt, his eyes sunken behind his glasses.

"I guess you've heard about Georg," he murmured, not even chiding him for his tardiness.

"Yes. It's just so sudden, though, and I... Could you tell me a bit more about what happened?"

"Not here. Let's talk outside."

Daryl led Freddie to an unused meeting room, then slumped down into a folding chair.

"I'm not too sure myself, but his parents say they found him passed away in his bed this morning."

"And what... what was the cause of death?"

"According to the paramedics who showed up, it seems to have been death due to frailty from extreme physical exhaustion."

"Frailty?"

He didn't understand. Georg had died from weakness? He'd been so lively just yesterday, hadn't he? How could something like this just happen overnight?

"Are you sure?"

"I got another phone call not long ago. The police said that their investigation turned up nothing suspicious. The body will be taken to a teaching hospital to be autopsied, but it doesn't seem like anything will come of it." Daryl unlinked his hands and put them to his face, then shook his head in disbelief.

"How about it being a suicide or something like that, then?"

"Suicide? What makes you think that?"

"Uh, oh. Nothing, really," he said vaguely.

He didn't even understand where it'd come from himself, but suddenly wondered whether maybe he had jumped to his death.

The sheep.

A pain, like being stabbed by a needle, flashed through the inside of his forehead.

*sheep sheep sheep.*
*sheep sheep sheep sheep sheep sheep sheep sheep sheep sheep sheep sheep sheep sheep sheep.*

A flock of sheep sinking their teeth into his brain.

He shook his head to drive away the image that accompanied the pain.

"What's wrong? Are you feeling under the weather as well?"

"No. It's nothing."

"I don't mind you going home for today if you're finding this hard. I'm sure they'll contact us and let us know when

the funeral is soon. I have no choice but to attend. What about you?"

"I'll be going, of course."

Was it out of politeness? It wasn't like they had known each other for a long time, but Georg had helped him out on many occasions—both in game development, and in other ways, too.

What 'other ways'? The naturally-surfacing thought bewildered him. He had never helped him outside of work. They'd never even gone out drinking together, and it wasn't like he screwed around with girls. He didn't even know where he lived; nor had they ever talked about his family. There had never been any cause for him to meddle in Georg's private life. Then why?

*Fuck. My head hurts.*

The stabbing pain in his head worsened, and Freddie gave up on thinking. Daryl had said that it was okay for him to go home, but he declined, saying that he wanted to put together a proposal. Sitting around by himself in his apartment would just make him depressed, and he thought that maybe finishing the proposal could even serve as some sort of memorial for Georg.

*"Hurry up and write the specification document, would you? Hohoho."*

He'd never hear that witch-like old lady voice ever again.

"This desk ended up being Catherine's after all, huh?" he thought to himself suddenly, returning to his own seat and staring at the empty desk next to him.

"...die. Freddie?"

He realised that Daryl was calling to him. His boss had donned his coat, carrying his bag under his armpit.

"I'm not feeling too well, so I'm going home early. I'm leaving the rest to you."

So that's how things were. The reason why he'd told him in such a carefree manner that he should go home was

because *he* wanted to leave. He had almost reconsidered his opinion and believed that he was in truth a boss who cared about his employees, but Daryl was still Daryl after all.

"Oh, right—would you sort out the things on Georg's desk? We'll need to send them back to his family. Thanks."

"…"

"I've told the president that the planning meeting will go ahead as scheduled, too, so make sure there are no oversights. Right, well. Good job."

*Fucking Daryl,* he thought as he watched his boss hurry out of the office. He wished that he'd fallen instead of Georg. All of a sudden, Freddie staggered hard. *Oh, that nonsensical image again. What the hell's going on today?*

He opened his desk drawer and fished around inside it. He tipped out his supplements and took out a small bottle of aspirin, shoving three into his mouth at once.

"Maybe I should've gone home, too."

Wondering whether he should go ahead and do it his eyes wandered to his time card, but he thought better of it and decided to sort out Georg's things instead. *I'm not like Daryl. I'm going to treat my colleagues with respect.*

He pulled out a folded cardboard box that had been tossed under the desk. It had been used when they had moved offices earlier. He'd just put his stuff in there for now. He set up the cardboard box, then began by opening the bottom-most drawer. Books about programming, work-related files, a check-up notification. Separating out the things that looked like personal items from those that didn't, he efficiently packed them into the box.

He continued in order, until he reached the top drawer. That was when he saw it—mixed in with an electric calculator and ballpoint pens, something glittering caught Freddie's eye. Brushing aside small items and taking it out, he saw that it was a silver rosary.

For a moment, his heart stopped. He stared at it, fixated. A rosary. Silver. A bell tower. The sound of a bell. A suspension bridge. Memories of scenes he shouldn't have had surged through his head like a cascade. Falling. A lone sheep. Falling. Two sheep. Falling. Three sheep, four sheep...

Feeling suffocated, he realised that he was holding his breath. He slammed the drawer shut, and stopped time began to move once again.

"Hah... Hah... Hah... Hah..."

Clutching his chest, he forced himself to start breathing again. He leaned against Georg's desk, panting. His whole body was weak. On the surface he was burning hot, but at his core he was freezing cold. In the end, Freddie left the rest of the things unsorted, spending the other half of the day unable to do a thing.

✤

Night fell once more.

"Oh. So that Georg guy's dead."

Catherine silently closed her eyes, as if grieving for the previous owner of the chair upon which she sat.

Night-time at the office. Usually, he would be able to hear the hustle and bustle of the team on the other side of the partition, but just for today the area was enshrouded in silence. The staff, shocked by what had happened to Georg, had all gone home when they were supposed to, leaving only Freddie behind.

"Are you okay?" Freddie looked at Catherine, who had turned up like nothing was wrong, with concerned eyes.

"Me? This is just work for me. Are *you* okay?"

"Me?"

"You have an awful look on your face." She leaned towards him, taking the chair with her, peering at him with

cat-like eyes and extending her pale arms. Pleasantly cold palms covered his cheeks. "Hehe."

Wondering if he glimpsed a sparkle in Catherine's blue eyes, she gave him a kiss that felt like the wings of an angel. It was a hesitant, sweet sensation. His head prickled at her scent, sweet like honey. As Freddie moved to respond to her, the kiss turned hungry and desperate. Her tongue, mollusc-like, slipped into Freddie's mouth, tracing the roof of his mouth with its tip. His body tingled as if electricity pulsed through him.

"C-Catherine..."

He grabbed her by the shoulder and tore himself away. A thread of spit hung like a bridge between the pair's lips.

A bridge.

Sheep. Bell tower. Collapse.

"Ugh..."

He leaned forward, clutching at his head. The dream he'd almost forgotten tried poke its head up out of the swamp of his memories, but he somehow managed to suppress it.

"Leave me alone..." he said hoarsely, shaking his head. His head hurt.

"You really don't look well at all, Freddie. Soooo, how about I make you feel better?"

"It's alright. I'm fine."

"Are you *sure* you're okay?" Catherine's joking tone became serious. "Maybe you should lie down for a bit?"

Looking concerned, Catherine gently put her hand behind his head, then beckoned him to rest it on her lap, still sitting on the chair.

"Catherine..."

"You must be tired out with all that's happened. I'll finish the proposal. You just take it easy."

*Ah, Catherine.* He'd never felt so at ease on a woman's lap before. Feeling as if his tightly bolted away heart was

being freed, he buried his face in the gap between her soft thighs.

"Hey! Freddie! You're so naughty."

She pinched his back, but even that felt nice. Catherine ran her fingers softly across the nape of his neck, not seeming to be truly angry.

"Hey, Freddie?"

"What?" he asked without opening his eyes.

"I guess I've kind of taken a liking to you. Would it be okay if I... came to your apartment tonight?"

There was bashfulness in her voice, but also a conviction that Freddie would say yes.

Arrogance and innocence coexisted within Catherine without a hint of contradiction. He no longer had the will to fight his desire.

"Sure," he replied, just as she wanted.

*No—I answered the way* I *wanted it.* He wouldn't be able to sleep alone tonight.

His headache was suddenly gone. At that moment, the pocket of his shirt began to vibrate.

"Hu-... what?"

Catherine pulled her chair back in shock, and he awoke from his cosy dream. *What the hell? I finally got to feel good.* He rose and took the phone from his pocket. He had had it set to silent, causing it to vibrate instead of ring. It wasn't a message, but an incoming call. The caller's name was displayed on the screen—*Stella*. He slammed the receiver against his ear.

"Hello."

"I finally got through. Hey, where are you right now?"

"Hmm? Who's that?"

Catherine threw back her head. In a panic, he hid the phone's screen from view.

"Sorry. I'll just go to the bathroom for a bit."

"W-wait!"

Ignoring Catherine's attempts to stop him, he jogged away and burst into the nearby conference room. He put the phone back to his ear.

"Hello? Is that you, Stella?"

"I called you so many times. Why didn't you answer?"

"Oh, you did?" He'd been so consumed with what had happened to Georg that he hadn't noticed. "Anyway, I'm at work, you know? I told you not to call me when I'm at the office."

"Hey, can we meet up now?"

Stella's voice, nasal and tearful, sounded like she was trying to hold back her anger. Freddie couldn't disguise his surprise at the sudden shift.

"What's up with you all of a sudden?"

"..."

"Hey, are you listening to me?"

Part and parcel of Stella's being an author was that her mood could change at the flick of a switch, but even still, something seemed off tonight. She wasn't the kind of woman who would suddenly ask to meet up. He could hear weeping on the other end.

"Hello? Hello!?"

"Sorry. I guess I'm still just confused..." He heard a sniffle.

"Something isn't right with you. Something actually happened, didn't it?"

"I don't want to talk about it over the phone. Please, just come to my house."

"You can't just ask something like that out of nowhere..."

Catherine's face flashed through his mind. He'd thought that he would be able to get through such a tough night if he was with her, and now this woman was going to get in the way.

"Sorry. I'm kind of tired, too. You're not the only one with stuff going on."

"Freddie. We're dating, aren't we? I want you by my side at a time like this. What're you thinking?" Her teary voice regained its demanding tone.

"I know, but I have problems of my..."

"If you don't come, I'll curse you."

Her sharp remark sent the scales of fate that had caused him continued turmoil leaning to one side. *I have horrible dreams every night, and now even a colleague has died—I'm exhausted. There's no way you're talking to me like that. What a thoughtless woman.*

"Sorry, but today isn't going to work," he announced, gripping the phone so tightly he thought he might crush it. "I'll make time somehow tomorrow."

"Tomorrow... won't do. Fine. Don't bother."

The call cut off abruptly. He pictured Stella, on the other end, slamming her phone against the wall.

"What the hell? You're the one making demands."

He'd even proposed the compromise that tomorrow would be fine; Stella was in the wrong for refusing. *Right—she's in the wrong.*

"What're you doing in here?"

Catherine opened the door and peered in. The office lights ate away at the pitch blackness of the conference room. The white Catherine stood there with white light at her back, looking like an angel.

"You took so long that I started getting worried. Weren't you going to the bathroom?"

"I, uh…"

"So, who were you talking to on the phone?"

"A friend. Of Georg's. They were really in shock, so I had to calm them down."

Giving her the excuse he'd randomly come up with, he plopped his phone back into his pocket. His palms were moist with sweat.

"Hmph. I see." Catherine's shapely brows knitted into a scowl, her nose twitching slightly. "I smell a woman."

"Seriously?"

He reflexively brushed off his shirt before he realised—why would a phone call leave a smell?

"Heehee."

Catherine's mouth turned up at the corners, as if to say *gotcha*. Cold sweat ran down Freddie's back. Freddie frozen with nerves, Catherine linked her arms around his, pressing her chest against him.

"Not that I mind, anyway."

The plump stimulus, separated from him by a thin blouse, pressed directly into his side, and Freddie's thoughts dulled.

"I finished the proposal. Now we can leave together, right?"

Catherine smiled bewitchingly, and all Freddie could do was nod.

✤

"Do you know the story of Rapunzel?"

"No."

"Hey, listen seriously for a minute."

She bumped her dissatisfied-looking face against Freddie's as he lay facing upwards on the bed. Pressing her body tightly to his, she pinched his upper arm with all her strength.

"That hurts!"

"I'll do something even worse next time if you don't listen."

"Okay, okay. I'll listen to whatever you want, start talking."

"Okay. Long, long ago, there was a girl called Rapunzel. She had very long, beautiful hair, but she had been shut away in a tall, tall tower by a witch."

"What for?"

"Her parents had stolen vegetables from the witch's garden. As punishment, they were forced to give up their child when she was born."

"There's no way something like that would ever happen."

"Just shut up and listen." This time, Stella dug in her nails.

"I told you, that hurts! Fine. I'll be quiet."

"Rapunzel was always shut away in that tower, and had never seen anyone other than the witch. But one day, a prince was passing by the tower when he happened to see her looking out of the window and fell in love with her at first sight. So he called to her, 'Rapunzel, please, let me inside your tower.'"

So there were princes who were superficial and lusted after women, too? Freddie considered making a joke, but after one look at Stella's face decided to remain silent. Instead, he jerked his chin to indicate that she should go on.

"So Rapunzel hung her long hair down from the tower. The prince clambered up it, and then they made love. The end."

"What the hell? What happened to the witch?"

"I think there was more, but I've forgotten it. Anyway, I wonder if I can use the story for the plot of the horror novel I'm going to write?"

"You mean rip it off?"

"No. Call it an 'inspiration,' please. The ending will be a lot better in my version, for sure," Stella declared, full of confidence. She was only happy when she was talking about her novels.

Freddie wanted to tease her a bit. He combed his fingers through her hair and kissed her earlobe.

"Interesting. Let's hear it, then."

"It's a secret."

"Come on. What was all that build-up for?"

"I suppose whether or not you get to hear what comes next depends on you."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Stella traced the confused Freddie's upper arm with her index finger, then licked her lips.

"Your skin is so pretty."

"Stop. You're creeping me out."

"Hehehe." Laughing bewitchingly, she leaned over him.

"I said stop. I'm not in the mood."

He tried to push her aside, but Stella's body was as heavy as lead.

"I wonder just where the witch got to. You don't have any idea, do you?"

Stella now sat astride him, her hair beginning to billow out around her. Like a snake, it wrapped itself around Freddie's neck, turning to steel and strangling him.

"Rapunzel. Poor Rapunzel."

Stella's voice grew louder and quieter, sounding both like a song and a curse, until finally his consciousness melted into the darkness.

✤

Freddie was driving in his car. He was on his way to Georg's funeral.

Large drops of rain, accompanied by wind, pounded against the windscreen. From the radio, which he had turned on for a change of pace, played a funeral march.

"Goddammit."

He slammed the switch to turn it off. The world was full of stupid shows.

As he drove down a road leading to the outskirts of town, Freddie's thoughts turned once more to the past. The dream he'd had at dawn was different from the ones so far —strangely realistic. His neck still ached where 'Stella' had strangled him. A thin line faintly wound its way around his neck, inflamed, like a string. There was no way that could actually be possible, though, so he must have been bitten by an insect or something like that. He'd have to stop by a pharmacy on the way home and buy some insecticide.

He'd spent the night before with Catherine, but he couldn't remember *how* they'd spent it. When he woke up the next morning she was gone, and Freddie lay in bed alone, covered in a cold sweat.

"Rapunzel. Rapunzel..."

The song-like melody came and went fleetingly inside his head. Distracted by it, he forgot to turn at a corner. He felt the impact of the car running aground on the shoulder of the road. The tyres, shaving away the asphalt, let out an

ear-splitting screech. Freddie was thrown forwards with a dull thud, his chest slamming against the steering wheel. For a moment he was unable to breathe, but was lucky that that was all. If he hadn't been wearing his seatbelt, he probably would've gone straight through the windscreen. He turned off the engine and staggered out of the car. Driving rain suddenly hammered against him, stealing Freddie's body heat away.

The car, rather than turning the corner, had passed by an oncoming vehicle and run onto the pavement opposite, then slammed into an elm tree and come to a stop. The bumper was crushed, part of it wedged into the roots of the tree.

"Well, shit."

It couldn't be the old witch's curse that he'd had an accident as soon as he thought of Rapunzel, he told himself, horrified by the strange coincidence. Georg's face flashed through his mind.

"Stupid. No way in hell."

He couldn't think of anything that Georg would bear a grudge against him for. Telling himself that he was too tired lately, he went to check out the damage to the car.

Luckily, aside from the dented bumper, nothing else appeared to be broken. The engine turned on without issue, and the oil didn't seem to be leaking. There were several scratches to the body, but the car was second-hand and already a decade old—a few more wouldn't make a difference. If he went straight to the funeral, he could still make it in time. In the end, though, Freddie got out of the car. He made a call to the dealer to request a tow truck. His instincts warned him that if he drove again, he was likely to end up in another accident.

After going through a variety of procedures, he called a cab, arriving at the church almost an hour late. The rain had let up somewhat, but the cold had intensified in its stead. Putting up the collar of his coat, he let out white

breaths as he headed for the graveyard. Crossing over a lawn, withered and mottled from the cold, a crowd of black umbrellas carried by mourners within the grove of trees came into view.

The coffin seemed to already have been interred within the ground. As the pastor prayed, the attendants placed flowers atop the coffin one by one. Freddie, standing at the tail end of the not-particularly-long queue, realised that he had left his offering of flowers in the car. *Damn*, he thought, but there was nothing he could do about it now. When his turn came he knelt beside the grave, grabbing a fistful of moist earth.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," he muttered, repeating the faintly-remembered words of prayer, sprinkling it onto the coffin.

The coffin was smaller than he had imagined. *Is this how it all ends after a person dies?* he wondered gloomily. Many of the mourners made the sign of the cross as they prayed, but Freddie simply stood there, motionless. Although he did believe in the devil, he knew that there was no god conveniently in this world to save people.

Once the prayers had been said, the coffin was covered over. Seeing this, some of the attendees broke down in tears once more, but Freddie was grasped by an emotion not unlike jealousy. At least there was someone who would cry for Georg. He was envious that even a man like him—not much of a talker with a constant backache—had someone to mourn his death. Would anyone be sad if *he* were to die? He couldn't think of a single name.

With the service over, the people naturally began to disperse. Although he thought he should extend his sympathies to the late Georg's family, he changed his mind upon seeing an ageing gentleman who looked the part speaking to Daryl. Daryl, wearing a feigned expression of meekness on his face, occasionally pretended to wipe tears from his eyes with a handkerchief. *Georg was an*

*indispensable talent to our company, and how shameful it is that he has been robbed of his bright future,* he could hear him saying. *I pray that his soul finds peace.* The words of condolence, unbelievable in their flippancy, made him want to throw up, and he walked by without so much as turning around. He sympathised from the bottom of his heart with Georg's family for having to hear something so tasteless.

Several of his work colleagues had also attended, and they invited him out to drink and reminisce about Georg, but he refused, saying that he wasn't feeling well. It wasn't as though he were lying, and he had to show his face at the dealership later, too.

Breaking away from the crowd, he went around to the back of the graveyard and walked down an eerie path lined with cracked, moss-covered headstones, when he saw a woman walking ahead out of the corner of his eye. She wore a black suit, her face covered with a veil. She held an umbrella low over her eyes, so he couldn't see her face, but the golden hair and slim proportions he could see beneath the umbrella seemed somehow familiar.

*Stella?*

The longer he looked, the more convinced he became. She continued on, not having noticed Freddie. What was she doing here?

He approached her, meaning to call out to her, but changed his mind at the last second. A rosary was tied around her wrist. The rosary was identical to Georg's, emitting a silvery light. *Why would... Stella have... Georg's...?* His thoughts stalled, and so did his movement. Her form gradually grew smaller, finally vanishing into the shadow of the trees.

The rain, which for a time had almost come to a stop, grew fierce once more. The cold wind shook the branches of the trees violently, trampling the flowers that had been left at the graves. The funeral attendees let out shrieks as they fled, seeking shelter from the elements. *Why is Stella*

*here?* Freddie stood alone in the solitary graveyard. He couldn't move a single step, as if there were needle ice stuck to the bottoms of his shoes.

*"Fre...dd...ie..."* he thought he heard a hateful voice say and turned around, but the only thing there was Georg's brand new headstone.

✤

He first returned home for a while to shower and thaw out his frozen body, then went through the formalities of having his car fixed at the dealership. It was explained to him that his insurance didn't cover accidents caused by his own negligence, and though he understood, it did depress him. The repair fee wasn't as much as he had thought it would be, but the unexpected bill smarted for someone on a low salary like himself. Daryl's threat to fire him if his next proposal didn't pass flashed through his mind.

"Shit. That asshole."

The fatigue penetrated his body to its very core, but he still felt like he needed a stiff drink. He didn't know how long he wandered for, but Freddie eventually found himself in front of a bar on the outskirts of town. The Stray Sheep.

*A place for sheep who've lost their way—just like me.*

A sarcastic smile on his face, he slowly opened the door.

"Welcome."

The usual bartender stood in the usual spot. Upon noticing Freddie, he nodded ever so slightly. He wore the same tasteless sunglasses as always. He felt the urge to send them flying, but, of course, Freddie instead simply sat down politely at the same spot by the bar he had sat in the last time. No sooner had he ordered a screwdriver than he was sucked in by the TV.

It was being reported that a new death from frailty had occurred. The victim was a young man. No one had been able to contact him for about a week, and a friend, worried, had gone to visit him when they discovered the body.

*"The deceased is Mr. Francis Dawson, 34. He was employed by a large brokerage firm and appears to have been a hard worker, with no reports of any incidents involving him,"* the female presenter read aloud in a businesslike tone.

"Sorry, could you change the channel?"

"Dear me. Does the news concern you, sir?" the bartender asked, setting the cocktail down on top of a coaster. He couldn't read his expression, but Freddie was half sure that his eyes were smiling behind his sunglasses.

"I just don't want to hear about someone dying. Especially not today."

"Someone once said that everyone dies; it's simply a matter of when."

"Just hurry up and change it, for God's sake."

"Ohh, scary. Very well, right away."

With the channel finally changed to a harmless shopping programme, he was finally able to have a drink. He listened to the sound of the ice cubes clinking inside the tumbler as he washed the chilled cocktail down his parched throat.

"Hi. Is here okay?"

He recognised the man who had spoken to him. He was a plain-looking, middle-aged man. Hadn't he called himself Vincent? He thought about turning him down for a moment, but the man had such an innocent-looking face that he silently indicated his assent. In any case, to be frank, he was too depressed to be drinking alone tonight.

"Aren't your friends here today?"

"Huh? Oh, Jonny and the guys. Looks like they all have overtime today. This happens, sometimes. Rum and coke, Erica?"

He placed his order with the red-headed waitress. Guessing from the casual exchange between them, they appeared to be old acquaintances.

"You know each other?"

"Since high school. Us, Jonny and Orlando were sort of stuck with each other in that way that happens a lot."

"'Stuck with each other'? That's awful. Now you've made me sad."

Erica, bringing over his cocktail, raised her beautiful eyebrows. She wasn't truly angered; it was nothing more than a playful exchange between two friends.

*Friends, huh?* Freddie didn't have anyone he could refer to as that. He had left the town where he was born as soon as he graduated from high school, travelling here and there, and had ended up in this town of drifters. That had been more than a decade ago, and all he had to show for it was the position of game planner at a horrible company with a shitty boss and a cheap, dust-blanketed apartment. Even then, it was infinitely better than having stayed in that town. Those crazy, Medusa-like women...

"Another of the same, please."

He'd need the power of alcohol to help him forget those repulsive memories—and someone to talk to, as well. Vincent was good for that. He didn't make any unwanted interjections, never interrupting his stories. He shut up and lent him a listening ear.

After emptying several glasses of screwdrivers, Freddie squeezed out his emotions, lingering like the froth clinging to the bottom of the tumbler, alcohol on his breath.

"You have a girl, Vincent?"

"A girl?"

"Wife, girlfriend, partner—whatever. Just a girl you're dating."

"Ohh. Well, of course I do... I think."

He scratched his cheek, his face indecisive. Did that mean that it wasn't serious? Come to think of it, the last time they'd met, he seemed to remember hearing something about him dating someone. Had a woman got her claws into him, too? Still, the fact that he was vague and evasive rather than stating that he had a girlfriend was the vastly preferable reaction. It was proof that he hadn't yet succumbed to a woman.

"Let me give you one bit of advice. Don't get too serious with a woman. Sleep with her two, three times, then shut it down. Even if you slip up, don't get in too deep."

"Uhh, what are you talking about?"

The man called Vincent seemed like a good person, but not a terribly bright one. He was exactly the type who would easily fall prey to a woman. Aided by the alcohol, he explained it in an easily understandable way.

"Women are the type who will try to take control of a man if he lets his guard down. To them, we're like fried chicken. They chew us right down to the bone, and as soon as they get tired of us we're either tossed aside or crunched up into little pieces."

"No way. She's not that type of woman," Vincent argued uncertainly. He must be thinking about the girl he was with.

"Look out. Maybe one day you might find yourself with a chain wrapped around your neck."

"For real?"

Vincent put his hand to his throat, creeped out. He looked as if he had instantly sobered up.

"How can you say that with such certainty, though?"

"Because I know."

"Know? Know what?"

"It happened when I was in junior high," he muttered.

As he did so, it seemed to Freddie as if the rotten smell he had been trying to forget permeated the entire bar. The last of his reason warned him that he shouldn't talk about it, but there was no stopping his tongue, loosened by the effects of the alcohol, from wagging now.

"It was a normal, stupidly peaceful Sunday. I went home after basketball practise let out and walked in on my sister and a guy she'd dragged in with her—in my room, of all places."

Standing there motionless, Freddie's older sister Helen's pale backside wiggled as she spoke.

"Your friend is the greatest."

No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't forget the sight of the visible blue veins, like a spider's web, with her asshole at the centre.

"She'd brought back my friend to screw while I was out. George was crying, screaming *forgive me* over and over, but she sank her teeth into his shoulder and demanded that he move his hips more. Blood pooled up from the tooth marks you could see clearly, and some of it dripped onto the sheets."

"…"

Vincent seemed unable to speak. It summoned a warped pleasure from within, the memories becoming more and more vivid.

"Once it was over, she blackmailed me, saying that if I told on her she'd spread rumours that George raped her. Poor George. He was such a good, hard-working guy. A while after that, he vanished from town. A missing persons report was filed, but he's still missing to this very day. Helen's still living that carefree life, seducing rich guys and playing the part of the chaste wife on the surface."

*Please, just hurry up and die.*

As Freddie abruptly fell silent after being so talkative, Vincent looked at him with clearly baffled eyes.

"Ah, um, uhh… What should I say?"

"You don't have to say anything."

Freddie took a cigarette from Vincent without asking, then put it into his mouth and lit it. White smoke swirled up towards the ceiling of the Stray Sheep.

"I just speak, and you just shut up and listen. That's all I want."

He regretted having ordered a screwdriver while he talked. The smell of the slice of orange was just like the odour of the woman's body that had filled the room that day. The stench of spoiled honey. To quell the nausea rising up in his stomach, he mindlessly smoked the cigarette down to ash.

"Women are more or less all like that. They're all too happy to sacrifice men for their own desires. If you want to

stay in this world, you have to get out of there before they show their true colours."

*Shit. Stella.*

Freddie had been sure that it was Stella herself whom he'd encountered at the cemetery. What had she been doing at Georg's funeral when she shouldn't have had anything to do with him? Why did they have the same rosary? The more he thought about it, the more he realised that there was only one possible conclusion at which he could arrive.

"But, I..."

After a long silence spent clouded in purple smoke, Vincent hesitantly opened his mouth.

"I get the feeling that there's a woman out there you can trust. I mean, maybe it doesn't seem that way to you..."

Vincent hurriedly waved his hand as if to say *don't misunderstand me*, but it came as a surprise to Freddie himself that rather than being angry, he actually liked him. *Was he actually listening to me?* But he couldn't hate him.

"Are you seeing a good woman?"

"Yeah. Sometimes I think she's too good for me."

"Hmph."

He looked weak and like he would promptly abandon his responsibilities, but deep down he was strong. He felt like no matter what happened, this guy would manage to survive.

"I'd like to meet a girl like that, too."

He deeply wanted to see Catherine. She might be different from the other girls he'd dated so far.

Catherine. That wild and devilish girl. He would have felt better if he'd just laid it all bare like this from the start.

Finishing his cigarette, he placed an order with the waitress.

"Two rum and cokes."

"Wait, I'm not done yet."

He laughed silently as Vincent pointed at his half-drunk glass.

"As thanks for listening to my story. And for this, too," Freddie said, taking another cigarette.

✤

Cutting through the park he frequented on his way home, he saw a woman sitting on a bench beneath a dim streetlight, swinging her legs back and forth.

"I've been waiting for you, Freddie."

Catherine raised her hand in salutation. She stood up, as if jumping down from a swing, then nuzzled her cheek against Freddie's chest.

"Mm. You smell good."

Catherine narrowed her eyes at the odour of alcohol and cigarette smoke that had permeated his clothes. Mingling with the citrus scent that came from her skin, it wafted lightly along on the night air. Freddie gripped Catherine by her shoulders and tried to detach her from him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked in a slightly stern voice. The park at night wasn't the kind of place where a young girl like Catherine should be.

"I had a feeling that you might be coming here."

"A feeling?"

"I'm highly attuned to these kinds of things, like where you are and what you're doing. Where I should go if I want to see you. I know it all." Catherine grabbed onto Freddie's nose and ran her tongue across his lips. "And I know that you think about me, too."

"Are you drunk, Catherine?"

"Maybe. I'm always drunk in reality, after all." She entwined her thin, supple arm around his.

"What are you doing?"

"Isn't it obvious? We're going back to your house together. We'll have a drink and a chat, and what comes

after that is for you to look forward to."

"Th-that's not going to happen."

Verbally he rejected her, but inside he was glad at Catherine's words. As soon as he'd thought about wanting to see her, there she had been, almost like a witch had granted his wish.

"You can say that, but it won't work. I'm special, aren't I?" Catherine said, as if she'd read his mind. Her two blue eyes, filled with confidence, shone amidst the darkness.

*I'm special.*

Her statement could be taken as arrogance, but Freddie could raise no argument. He didn't know why, but he felt like it was okay to expose his innermost self to Catherine.

"Heehee."

Catherine smiled suddenly, then began to trace Freddie's cheek with her index finger.

"What?"

"I love the face you're making right now."

"Don't tease me."

"Hey, I'm not. You're just so cute, like a lost puppy out in the rain. Like you're saying, 'Help. Help me.'"

"Cut it out. I don't want anyone's help."

Freddie tried to shake off her finger, but Catherine wrapped her arm around his neck and he went still.

"You can rely on me all you want, you know. So long as it's you, I can deal with whatever you throw at me."

Her sweet breath tickled his ear, seeping through right to his core. The next thing he knew, he had taken her hands in his.

They walked through the park, hand in hand. They weren't exactly innocent high school kids. Until yesterday, Freddie would have snorted at this, but for some reason it now felt natural. Catherine went obediently along with it. Shockingly enough, beneath the moonlight her cheeks, reflected in a puddle of water, were faintly pink.

"This is kind of embarrassing."

Her voice, unusually shy, made Freddie's emotions heighten. He gripped her hand more tightly, and Catherine passionately squeezed back.

"Catherine..."

"Whaat?"

"I like you, Catherine."

He realised that his voice was trembling. His mouth was dry from tension and anxiety. This might be the first time in his entire life that he'd said such words to a woman and meant them. Freddie himself had never imagined that a day would come when he would utter a profession of love that had nothing to do with his personal interest or instinctive desires. Maybe Catherine was a special woman after all. If he was rejected this time, he really would never be able to trust another woman for the rest of his life.

"Tell me. What do you think of me?"

"Hehe. Didn't I just tell you?"

"I want to hear it one more time. Clearly."

*Please,* he begged, as if in prayer.

"I like you, Freddie. I love you," Catherine declared, bringing her face close to his.

She gave him a kiss like the gentle flutter of wings. As he felt Catherine's residual warmth on his lips, Freddie realised that for the first time in his life, he was experiencing actual romance.

✤

On the way, they stopped at a nearby all-night supermarket to buy beer and snacks. It was a quiet shop with no other customers, and when Catherine enquired as to whether they had her favourite brand of beer, the employee who had been stocking the shelves behind her turned and presumptuously scowled, glaring at Freddie. After leaving the store, he walked along feeling unpleasant, as if he was suspected of shoplifting or something like that.

"He was staring because I'm so pretty," Catherine asserted, full of self-confidence. "I have pervy old men staring at my chest all the time."

"Yeah. I guess that could be it," Freddie agreed.

*But Catherine would be wasted on a kid like that. I'm the only one who can satisfy her. He'd be better suited to going off and chasing some younger tail.*

"I'll kick the shit out of him if he eyes you up like that again."

"Yikes, that's cool. I think I'm falling for you even more."

Cradling a paper bag, Catherine climbed the stairs to his apartment still hanging from his arm. That was when he noticed that there was light spilling from the window of his room, tucked away in the corner. He was sure he had switched it off before heading for the Stray Sheep after he'd got back from Georg's funeral. As long as he hadn't been burgled, there was only one possibility he could think of. Was Stella there…?

Freddie tutted softly. He didn't want to be running into Stella when Catherine was with him.

"What's wrong, Freddie?"

Catherine didn't seem to have noticed. Maybe she thought that Freddie had forgotten to turn off the lights.

"What's wrong? Let's just go inside."

Perhaps tired of being spoiled, she tugged on his arm.

"No, hold on."

"I'm getting cold. I wanna get warmmm. With. You."

Catherine shot him a sweet, flirtatious look, but he didn't have the chance to savour it. Freddie's gaze was locked on the room's door. A dark figure flitted past the frosted glass window beside it. Long hair. An hourglass figure. Impossibly stylish proportions. There was no mistaking it—it was Stella.

Usually, she would have contacted him by email first—why had she chosen tonight of all nights to show up

without warning? Not understanding Stella's intentions, Freddie simply stood in the hallway.

"Hey? *Freddie.*"

He was brought back to reality by Catherine tugging him forwards by the arm. He at least had to stop them bumping into each other. Getting caught up in a troublesome lovers' quarrel was the last thing he wanted.

"S-sorry. Could you go home for today?"

"Where'd that come from?" Catherine asked, her eyes upturned. A violent light, like bubbling lava, took hold in her previously placid eyes. "Is there some reason it'd be a bad idea for me to go in there?"

"...Of course not." He casually used his body to shield the door from Catherine's attempt to push inside. "I just don't feel so good. Maybe I had a bit too much to drink."

"Oh, really? You should go lie down in bed, then. I'll be your nurse."

"U-uh, nah, I'm fine."

He grasped her shoulder and pushed her away, deepening Catherine's suspicion.

"What's up? I'm telling you that I'll be your doting nurse. Why are you acting like this?"

"I told you, I really don't feel well. I really want to be with you, but what if I threw up on you or something?"

"Ew, is it really that bad?"

"Uh... My stomach is pretty upset. I'm really sorry. I'll make it up to you, I promise. Just go home for today."

As he put his hand against his chest and gazed exaggeratedly at the sky, he heard a voice from inside.

"Freddie?"

For a moment, he felt as if the whole world was in monochrome.

"Huh? I thought I heard someone's voice just then."

"M-must've been your imagination."

Catherine tried to peer over his shoulder and through the window, and he restrained her with all his might.

"Are you back, Freddie?"

He heard the knob turning from inside and reflexively spun around. As the door opened, it made the same sound as rope rubbing against the tree branch from which one was to hang. A cold sweat covered Freddie as Stella peered out. Immediately, he stretched out his arms as if to shield Catherine.

"S-Stella..."

"You're late."

Stella was dressed roughly in a camo-patterned tank top and holey jeans. Her face was pale, and she didn't look well at all.

"Why're you just standing around? Aren't you coming in?"

"No, uh..."

Answering non-committally, he desperately tried to come up with an excuse, but his headache worsened suddenly, as if his lie to Catherine about being drunk had come true, and he couldn't think of anything sensible.

"She's just a colleague from the office, and I only came here because she said she wanted to see my apartment."

It was the dumbest excuse, so bad he wanted to strangle *himself*. Not only was it bad, but he couldn't stand acting unassumingly toward Stella. Freddie had vowed that he would never become a woman's slave—and yet look at him now. His disgrace made his chest hurt even worse.

"What are you talking about?"

But Stella simply stared at him in confusion. She opened the door wide, moving aside to let Freddie in.

"Hurry up and come inside. It's cold."

"Come in? You mean her, too?"

"I told you, I don't know what you're talking about. There's no one here but you. Or do you mean you're even drunk on a day like this?"

"No one else here...?"

Turning around, all he saw was the chilly hallway illuminated by fluorescent lights, a dark abyss further in. Catherine was nowhere to be found.

*No... way...*

Until merely ten seconds earlier, Catherine had been right behind him. He could feel her breath on his neck; the slenderness and curvature of her shoulder that he could still feel against his palm. *Catherine*, he went to call, but just managed to regain his sense of reason. He couldn't just go around calling her name in front of Stella.

"S-so, uh, what's up with you today, Stella?"

"There's something important we need to talk about."

"Something... important?"

He'd never heard Stella mention anything like this before. He hesitated, and Stella jerked her chin, motioning for him to enter.

"Just come on in, would you?"

He didn't want to go inside. *Why?* he wondered. It was his own, safe home, so why was he so resistant to set foot inside it? He felt as if his precious sacred space was being invaded.

"Freddie."

Stella's voice took on a hardness. All he wanted to do was turn on his heel and run off to search for Catherine. Had she figured out what was going on and left? Or had he disappointed her? Fear and unease ran through his mind.

In reality, however, he could not go looking for Catherine. As if a moth drawn to a flame, he had no choice but to go inside the apartment. The world closed off behind him.

"You're late."

Saying the same thing as before, Stella stood by the kitchen. She poured milk from a carton into a cheap glass she'd taken from the cupboard, then put in some granulated sugar and stirred. Her tastes were as weird as

ever. It seemed like a complete waste of milk to him, but Stella didn't recognise non-sweet things as drinkable.

"You want some, Freddie?"

"No."

There was something he wanted to ask. He waited for Stella to sit opposite him at the table, then began. "What're you doing here out of the blue today?"

"..."

"I thought you were busy with work?"

"..."

Stella silently held the glass with both hands, wetting her lips with the sweet milk. The clock seemed uncomfortably loud as the seconds ticked by. She'd said that she wanted to talk, and yet here she was, not saying a word.

Unable to relax, Freddie shifted around on the chair, but finally couldn't stand it any longer and got straight to the point.

"So, what's this 'important thing' we need to talk about?"

"How have you been feeling lately?"

"'Feeling'?"

He was taken aback by the sudden query. *There's no way my health is the 'important thing' she wants to talk about.* Unable to read Stella's intentions, Freddie fell further into confusion.

"Have you been having bad dreams, or anything like that?"

"Dreams..."

"Yeah. Nasty dreams."

*Why would she ask about that? Why would Stella even care about what kind of dreams I'm having? I never talk to anyone about my dreams.* Prickle. *Ahh, my head again.*

"Don't you think something's weird about you lately? You're so curt on the phone whenever I call, and you don't reply to my emails."

Stella momentarily stopped talking and sipped at her milk as if appraising Freddie, who had his index and middle fingers pressed against his forehead.

"So I'm wondering if you're having nightmares that are stopping you from getting enough sleep or something."

"I'm busy with work. That's all."

"With work?"

"Yeah. Didn't we talk about this? A colleague passed away. I went to his funeral today. I've been kind of tied up, what with all of this..." He made it that far before he suddenly noticed. "Right. Where were you this afternoon?"

That woman he'd seen at Georg's funeral. Looking back on it now, she'd looked just like Stella—and the same silver rosary.

"You didn't know Georg or anything like that, right?"

"'Georg'?"

"Yeah. A young guy in his late twenties. He's a programmer of Polish descent, laughs weirdly, sorta looks like an old witch..."

"Hold on one second," Stella said, holding up her right hand and indicating for him to stop. "Anyway, you still haven't answered my question. Are you having nightmares? Aren't you?"

"I'm not."

"Really?" she murmured, her eyes searching. "You're not having dreams about falling, or anything like that?"

The sounds that echoed from the bell tower's stone walls suddenly flooded back to him. The funeral bell rang out inside the room. Pain. His head felt like it was splitting.

"They say that if you don't wake up right away when you dream of falling, you die."

Freddie pressed his hands against the table, desperately trying to support his unsteady body. He was afraid that if he didn't, the floor would give way beneath him and send him plummeting into the depths of the abyss.

"A flock climbing to somewhere high up. All of them with the faces of sheep."

Baaaaa.

*Red eyes. Horns. hornshornshornshornshornshornshornshornshornshorns. horns.*

"Cut it out. Is this for another of your stupid novels? Who gives a shit, anyway!?"

He kicked away his chair and stood. If the dream had seeped into the real world, it was all over. Was he supposed to just sit there and let her keep talking about the nightmares?

*The real world. Think about the real world.* Freddie frantically tried to think of something else. *Right. Stella's trying to change the subject. She must be feeling guilty about something and making up some story about dreams so she doesn't have to answer my question. Does she really think I'm gonna go along with it?*

"You and Georg..."

He began to voice the suspicions he'd had in his head the whole time. He should grill her about it, then break up with her. A woman like this...

"What're you talking about, Freddie?"

Stella took another gulp of her milk, seeming not to have noticed Freddie's irritation. Even still, Freddie didn't fail to notice the slight trembling of her fingers.

"Stella..."

The blood rushed to his head and he made for her, but slammed his body against the table in his haste. The impact caused the glass of milk to topple over. The white liquid spilled across the table and began to drip onto the floor. He hurriedly tried to pick up the fallen glass as it rolled towards the edge of the table, but he was too slow. The cheap glass fell, shattering into tiny pieces. To Freddie's eyes, it looked much like a sheep. In an instant, he was

plunged from the peak of rage to absolute zero. The strength left his body.

"...Could you go home for today? Just go home," he said weakly to Stella, covering his face.

"...Alright."

Her face downturned, Stella's expression was hidden beneath her eyelashes. Still, she stood obediently, grabbed her handbag and headed for the door.

"I might contact you again tomorrow. Is that okay?"

"Yeah."

If he could make it through tonight—if he got to feel the morning sun on his face.

Freddie couldn't help but feel like this night would last forever.

"Alright, then. Bye."

The door shut, leaving Freddie all alone. Turning his gaze sluggishly to the broken glass, he saw black ants swarming around the spilt milk on the floor. *Stella's too indulgent,* Freddie thought, his head aching, as he watched the crowd of ants writhe impatiently.

# Chapter 3

He heard the sound of a door shutting behind him.

"Where...?"

Freddie was standing inside an unfamiliar building. High above his head was an arch-shaped plaster ceiling. There was no hint of fire inside the gaping hall, surrounded by marble walls, with cold air blowing in from somewhere. Faded portraits hung from the walls, covered in moss that made it impossible to tell what they depicted. Black and white tiles spread out to form a mosaic on the floor. Taking a closer look, he saw that it was shaped like an arrow. The arrow pointed forwards from where Freddie stood.

"So you want me to go that way, huh? But wait, first..."

He surveyed his surroundings. Just where was he? He didn't recognise the building. No windows were set into the walls, a chandelier suspended from the ceiling casting the only faint light. Even still, the red flames of its candles brought him no warmth.

"Ugh. It's freezing."

He wrapped his arms around himself, then realised that his feet were bare. If he went on standing around like this, he'd freeze to death. Turning around, he saw that there was no door—just empty black space stretching out before him.

"Guess I have no choice but to go on ahead, then."

Having no other choice, Freddie cautiously began to walk. Following the arrow mosaic, he finally left the hall and stepped into a narrow hallway. As he went, the candles of the chandelier were extinguished in the places he had

passed through. Behind him was pitch blackness. There was no turning back now.

He walked along, as if enticed inwards, until finally the hallway began to twist to the right. Turning the corner, he was shocked. Ahead of him stretched marble stairs covered with red rugs, upon which stood a crowd of sheep walking upright. The sheep looked familiar. He'd definitely seen the same thing before, when he'd scaled the castle walls... Something prickled in the back of his head.

"Right. So I'm inside that castle."

He remembered crossing the suspension bridge from the ramparts and entering the black castle. So was this a continuation of that, then?

The nightmare wasn't over. In fact, the stairs stretched on and on, as if to say that this was just the beginning.

"So I'm supposed to climb those?"

It wasn't like he had to scale an impenetrable, sloping cliff like the time at the ramparts, but even still, the stairs went on for so long that there was no end in sight.

"Hey, you got a minute?" Freddie called to a nearby sheep, hoping to figure out what was going on.

But the glasses-wearing sheep ignored his appeal, beginning to sluggishly climb the stairs.

"Wait up!"

Grabbing him by the shoulder and pulling him back, the sheep turned in irritation.

"Whadda you want? Get outta my way."

His voice was high-strung and harsh. For some reason, the instant Freddie heard it he felt a sensation of discomfort rise up from within. He momentarily fought it back and questioned him.

"What's beyond here?"

He pointed at the long, long stairs. They were wide, with several sheep climbing them side by side at once, but he felt as if there were fewer than there had been at the walls.

"Dunno."

The sheep's response was curt. He clicked his tongue often as if in annoyance.

"What do you mean you 'dunno'...?" Freddie asked in earnest surprise. "So we're supposed to just go on ahead and climb up there? What for?"

"I told you, *I dunno*. Just how dumb are you?"

The sheep stamped its hoofed foot, as if having flown into a temper. It turned its bloodshoot, glasses-covered eyes on Freddie.

"There's nowhere else to go. We've gotta climb, then, right? Or are you planning on just standin' around here like a fool forever?"

"...No."

The air inside the castle had grown so cold that he could no longer stand it. Goosebumps rippled across his exposed flesh. And then there was the horrible presence he'd been sensing behind him for some time now— *something* was coming this way.

"So it's back, huh? Hey, what is that thing?"

The creepy tentacles and claws that had attacked Freddie. The suspension bridge torn apart. The falling sheep. Remembering it sent shivers down his spine.

"Shut up. Just leave me alone."

The sheep coldly shook free of Freddie's grasp, then began climbing the stairs as if in pursuit of the other sheep. Freddie suddenly realised that he was the only one left standing at the foot of the stairs. As he watched the sheep gradually grow smaller and smaller, he suddenly began to feel lonely.

"Wait for me!"

Freddie, too, swiftly began to climb. The rug was damp, sticking to the soles of his feet. Feeling like a cockroach made him even more depressed.

Ancient Roman-style life-size statues stood at regular intervals on either side of the stairs. Red flames lit up the

trays and torches they held, but gave off no heat and did nothing to warm his body.

He desperately hoped that he could make it to the top before his legs got so cold that they stopped moving. Even the breaths he expelled appeared distinct and white.

How far had he climbed? Finally, he heard a scream from up ahead. One of the sheep had collapsed, clutching at its stomach. Red blood seeped from between the gaps in its fingers, dyeing the dirty rug back to vibrancy.

Panic began to spread amongst the sheep, who had up until then been climbing in silence. Freddie included, most of them were unable to understand what had happened. They stopped and watched over it, but the collapsed sheep continued to bleed, finally spasming faintly before going still.

*He's dead...*

The sheep surrounded him in wordless commotion. One of the eagle-eyed sheep who had been near the collapsed sheep finally let out a scream, pointing at one of the statues.

"Baa! Look at that!"

The statue was modelled after a Roman soldier. He donned a helmet adorned with wings, dignified armour, and a cape, holding a rectangular shield. What attracted Freddie's attention, however, was the fresh, bright red blood that dripped from the tip of the pike held aloft in its right hand.

"!!"

At that moment, a statue nearby to where the sheep had pointed moved. All of a sudden the apparent marble statue jabbed out its spear, as if having a mind of its own, attacking the sheep. The sheep, not having anticipated this, was instantly skewered clean through the stomach, froth bubbling from his mouth as he breathed his last.

"Baaaaaa!" someone shouted.

By now, they were in a complete panic. All of the sheep began hurrying up the steps as quickly as they could. They all rushed to the centre of the stairs so as to put as much distance as possible between them and the murderous, moving statue, at once leaving him trapped. Everyone dragged down the sheep in front of him, so that at least he may proceed even a little forward. Ugly struggles broke out here and there. As they squashed together, unable to move, the living statue's spear attacked anew.

The sharp tip of the spear ran through several sheep simultaneously. Blood splattered all over, wool fluttering through the air.

"This thing's bad news..."

Amidst the pandemonium that surrounded him, Freddie was—to a certain extent—calm. Rather than forgetting himself and making a run for it, he simply stooped over and waited to see what would happen.

As far as he could see, it didn't appear as though all of the statues that stood opposite each other on the sides of the stairs carried weapons. Statues of Roman soldiers stood on one side at intervals, several statues in between each, but it looked like the others were all goddess statues that held lamps. All he would have to do, in that case, was to pass by the goddess statue on the other side whenever he came to a step with a Roman soldier on it. That would put the most distance between them, and should be safest. Making his decision, Freddie set off once more.

"Your partner's pretty brutal, huh?" he muttered as he passed by a semi-naked goddess statue. If he didn't make such light jokes, he was afraid that his mental balance would crumble.

It seemed as though there were others like Freddie amongst the terrified sheep who had come to the same realisation as he had. The glasses sheep he had spoken to earlier was one of them. No—if anything, the glasses sheep was even more shrewd than Freddie, and had even waited

for the murderous statues to prey on the other sheep. Then, once the spear had been temporarily withdrawn, he had seen his chance and taken it.

*I can't stand that guy...*

The way he was underhanded enough to be willing even to use the other sheep as a shield just so he could move along was too much to take.

*He's not a decent sheep anyway.*

Freddie spat on the rug, then resumed his ascent. As he climbed, the statues on either side eventually disappeared, giving way to an area that looked like a landing. Perhaps this place was meant for him to take a breather. It was an act of consideration he was grateful for.

The number of sheep had been cut almost in half. Their shoulders drooped with exhaustion, and here and there he even saw sheep who lay flat on the floor, motionless.

"Hey. Pull yourself together," Freddie called to the sheep one by one in encouragement. "Now's not the time to be sitting around exhausted here. Get up and move."

Freddie himself was more surprised by his actions than anyone. He wasn't the type to be concerned about others, yet his tongue had moved by itself when he had seen the fatigued sheep. It reminded him of the sheep who had saved him at the 'cliff stairs' on the previous floor.

*He was a good guy. He gave me advice even though he didn't know me from Adam, and he's the only reason I managed to make it this far.* The poor guy, who had plummeted with a scream. *This time, it's my turn to repay him,* he decided firmly.

And then there was the glasses sheep. Each time he looked at the glasses sheep, maintaining his distance from the others and back hunched so as not to stand out, it made him think about how much he didn't want to turn into someone so awful. Freddie decided that he should keep his eye on him. If he didn't, he might be the next to be sacrificed.

*I hope* he *falls into hell,* Freddie muttered silently, stood, and clapped his hands.

"Alright. Come on, everyone. Not far to the goal now. Put your backs into it!"

He had no proof whatsoever that they were nearing the end of the staircase. Even still, if he didn't believe it and forcibly will himself on, he wouldn't be able to take a step.

Passing over the landing, the difference of the level of the stairs suddenly increased. The height of each step was roughly to his knees. He would have to raise his legs higher to climb them, making the burden even heavier. It seemed like the person who created this castle was a certified sadist. He must be gloating all the way through tormenting these pitiful lambs.

"Go to hell," he muttered, his voice hoarse.

How far had he climbed since then? It seemed like the world's time had stopped ticking, yet the fatigue was clearly piling on. His legs were growing unsteady, and several times he had almost slipped down the steps.

He heard a scream from amidst the sheep who had gone on ahead. One of the sheep came tumbling down the stairs. As it passed by Freddie he immediately reached out his hand, but couldn't make it in time. Its desperate scream still echoing in his eardrums, the sheep fell far, far below before disappearing from view.

"What happened?" he shouted to the sheep ahead.

"The step sloped all of a sudden," a confused voice called back.

The step had vanished and turned into something like a slide, apparently causing him to lose his footing. After that, he had lost his balance and gone tumbling.

"How many traps *are* there?"

He could no longer climb up normally as he had been doing so far. He bent over, looking closely at the step he was to climb onto. The rug had been removed, leaving the marble bare. The long, vertical levels were made up of the

usual cube blocks, and upon closer inspection he saw that some of the blocks had checked patterns engraved upon them. It was just like the cliff stairs he had climbed last time.

As a test, he lifted his right leg and cautiously poked at it with the tips of his toes. The instant his foot touched it, the block rotated 45 degrees with a crash, the stair part slanting. Flustered, he withdrew his leg. It was a simple trap, but an effective one. The marble was slippery, and if he lost his balance once he was unlikely to regain it.

"Watch out for the patterned stones."

Even as Freddie called out, several sheep slipped and fell. There were even other sheep who thoughtlessly stepped on and were skewered from below, as if on pincushions.

"Dammit."

He clicked his tongue at the terrible scene, then turned, feeling a presence behind him. The glasses sheep stood a level below Freddie.

"What're you doing?"

"Nothing in particular."

He would give no real answer, a vague smile plastered to his lips. Even still, he didn't need to say anything for Freddie to understand what he was up to. His plan was to follow along after Freddie, using the safe spots he found.

"What are *you* doing, hm? Forget about me and go on ahead."

"Hmph."

This sheep was a jerk through-and-through. Had they been anywhere else, this would be the point where Freddie would've smacked him right in the face, but preserving his own life took priority at this moment in time. And to do that, too, he had to climb to the top of these stairs.

He checked out each stone step he was to stand upon as he went, and, as he had suspected, the glasses sheep

followed right behind. When Freddie moved, so did he; when he came to a halt, the other sheep followed.

*He must be like some kind of suckerfish, using other people's leftovers to survive.* It drove him crazy, but getting involved seemed like it would just piss him off more, so he decided to just ignore it.

Despite Freddie's warning drawing attention to them, there were still sheep who screwed up and got caught by the traps. Suddenly, he noticed that they had decreased quite sharply in number, so few remaining now that he could count them on his fingers.

Whenever he was left without a foothold he moved to the adjacent block, or secured himself a route by pulling out the one in front. Gradually, he became accustomed to the puzzle-like set-up. How far had he ascended like this?

From high above his head, he heard the chiming of a bell.

"Good. Not much further now."

It was the bell in the bell tower that represented his salvation. Looking up, he saw a golden door standing at the top of what he had to climb. Windows appeared at either side of the stairs, through which spilled light. He could see a huge, silver moon through the frosted glass.

Freddie instinctively knew that he would be saved if he could make it to that door. Giving one last spur of encouragement to his heavy body, he desperately urged his faltering legs on. Just twenty more steps, and then tonight's nightmare would be over. He panted, feeling assured of his victory—and that was when it happened.

*"Freeeeeeeddieeeeeeeee!"* the same voice from before screamed from the depths of the earth.

A malevolent surge that seemed like it would swallow Freddie whole whooshed past him, sending a chill down his spine. He mustn't look. He mustn't turn back. He knew it, and yet his body moved of its own accord. He looked over his shoulder, and the first thing he saw was the glasses

sheep. Behind him was a gaping darkness and an eerie shadow clambering out from within.

"Freddieeeeeeeee!"

What revealed itself from beneath the stairs was a huge female torso. Its face alone was taller than Freddie. Short, brunette hair flowed behind her, and she wore the casual combination of a black t-shirt and leather jacket. Her long, red-painted nails extended and withdrew as if in search of their prey. From the waist down she melted into the darkness, and he couldn't see what was there.

What paralysed Freddie more than anything, however, was that the woman had no face. The space between her forehead and chin was gone, as if it had been scooped out with a giant spoon. None of her nerve tissue or skull jutted out, simply leaving a smooth space reminiscent of a rubber ball.

"Freddieeeeeee!"

And yet he could clearly hear her calling to him. Rather than hearing her cries, it felt like they were directly resounding within his brain.

"Don't leave meee!"

"Ah!"

Freddie was frozen, paralysed, unable even to recognise the voice as his own.

*Leave me alone. Please, leave me alone.*

His prayers had the opposite effect. As if having read his thoughts, the woman stopped moving momentarily, then clearly switched targets to Freddie.

"I've fouuund youuu!"

The woman's pace increased as she crawled up the stairs. Each time he looked, the distance between them shortened. Thirty steps. Twenty-five steps. Twenty steps.

Then, Freddie noticed the red butterfly earring glinting in the flat-faced woman's ear. He recognised it. It was...

Just as the horrible memory buried within the swamp of his mind was about to surface, the glasses sheep let out a

shriek from behind Freddie.

"You're in my way. Get a move on!"

The glasses sheep raced up to the same level upon which Freddie stood, blindly attempting to push him aside. His elbow accidentally slammed into Freddie's face, the pain causing him to come crashing back down to earth.

*I can't let go of myself now. I have to get away from that thing.*

Taking back control of his body, Freddie tried to sprint towards the door above that served as his goal, but the glasses sheep clung onto him.

"Please. Do something about that thing."

"L-let go of me!"

"You're wrong. I was just playing around with her. We already broke up. So please, stop... Please leave me alone, Dad!"

The glasses sheep's cries made no sense. There was no way it could be a man.

Freddie remembered. The red butterfly. A birthday present. Yes—her name was...

"Fuck. I'm not dying!"

The glasses sheep, deranged, grabbed Freddie by the neck and tried to pull him to the ground. He was going to sacrifice Freddie to save himself.

"Let go of me, asshole!"

The two struggled on the stairs. Freddie resisted desperately. Even as they went at it, she was drawing closer and closer, her sharp claws clicking like those of a crab. Being torn apart by those wouldn't leave a single scrap of flesh behind.

The glasses sheep tried forcibly to offer Freddie to her as a sacrifice.

"Please, die instead of me!"

"Like hell. You're the one who's gonna die!"

He used all of his might to slam the glasses sheep with a hard right punch. He swayed violently, then tripped.

"Agh!"

The glasses sheep flailed his arms, trying somehow to maintain his balance, but it was all in vain. His stout body slowly tumbled down the stairs, as if defying the laws of gravity.

"I've got youu!"

The woman seized the glasses sheep with her claws, then easily squashed him like an orange.

A shriek.

But Freddie didn't have the time to casually stand around and watch. Covering his ears, he desperately hurried towards the door that marked his freedom.

He gripped the golden doorknob and twisted it open with all of his strength. Light flooded out from within.

"Freddieeeee!"

Ignoring the woman's scream, he tumbled through the door.

✤

Upon awakening, he found himself in bed. Pushing aside the covers and sitting up, he realised that he was dripping with night sweat. His heart was pounding.

"Goddammit. What's going on?" he groaned, covering his face with his hands. "What the hell *was* that?"

He felt like he'd been chased by something. He'd desperately fled, desperately climbed.

*Right.* Freddie looked up in shock. *I was running up some stairs in a fight for my life. Then she came after me.*

'She'? Who was 'she'?

The faceless woman. She wore an earring. The fleeting memory of a red butterfly.

*I know that. A shrill sound. The sweaty green room of a bar. And...*

"Dammit."

Just a little more and he would have remembered, when morning light flooded through the curtained window and melted Freddie's memories away.

"Shit."

He punched the pillow. What was happening to him every night?

He got up, sluggishly putting his arms into the sleeves of his shirt. Checking the clock, he saw that he was certain to be late. Daryl was going to be making sarcastic remarks again—but what did he care?

A dustpan lay on the table, still with shards of broken glass in it. He had fallen asleep after picking it up the night before. Bright red lipstick marks still remained on one of the fragments.

Stella's lips.

Freddie tossed the entire dustpan into the dustbin beside the sink. Why had Stella suddenly shown up here last night, muttering something about dreams?

"No. That's not what's important."

Why had Stella had the same rosary as Georg?

"She couldn't have been cheating on me with Georg, could she?"

There was no indication of it, but he could think of no other explanation. Freddie wasn't enough of a believer in the goodness of the world—or, to put it another way, the truthfulness of women—to brush it off with a laugh.

"Stella and Georg…?"

Why would Stella, introverted and with no interest in anything other than writing novels, want to shack up with someone like Georg? Was it all a bit of fun, or was it serious? Then what was she sleeping with *him* for?

Confused, Freddie tried to recall the face of his former colleague. For some reason, however, though he was dressed like a man in a polo shirt and jeans, from the neck up he had the head of an old witch. The creepy witch grabbed hold of Stella's long hair, laughing, Stella sobbing

with her little mouth wide open. The image took over his memories.

"I don't get it!" he shouted, throwing down the other glass that had been in the sink. As he looked down at the tiny shards, a sharp pain ran through his body.

*This pain... like falling from a high place...*

"Ugh!"

Clutching at his temple, Freddie leaned against the dustbin. He felt like all the blood had left his body. He took out his phone, thinking to call in sick to work with how awful he felt, but changed his mind.

"...Catherine."

He wanted to see her. To Freddie, Catherine seemed like the only one he had to rely on for mental support. In this chaotic, nightmarish world, the only thing he was sure of was his desire to be with her.

Her devilish blue eyes. Her porcelain skin. Her coquettish, pale pink lips. He wanted to smell the enchanting aroma of her skin one more time.

Freddie stood, as if sleepwalking. He had to go to work so he could see Catherine. Nothing else mattered. He just wanted to hear her voice. He wanted her to look at him with those goosebump-inducing eyes.

"Catherine..."

✤

It was around noon when he arrived at the office. He entered the building and quietly punched in, before realising that something in the air felt different from usual. His colleagues looked strangely absent-minded as they sat facing their monitors. They mechanically tapped away at their keyboards, but their eyes were blank. Stooping over, feeling an electric charge as if from an approaching storm, Freddie made for his desk. Along the way, he noticed that Daryl's desk was empty.

"Thank God."

He had come fully prepared for the lecture, and for a brief moment felt relieved.

"If you're looking for Daryl, he's dead," a teammate from the adjacent desk announced suddenly.

For a minute, he thought it was a tasteless joke. Dead? *Daryl*?

*Come on, now. He's the type of guy who wouldn't die even if someone killed him. You must know that.*

Freddie silently waited for a colleague to say, *"What? You're not gonna fall for it? Boring,"* and he would immediately shoot back a reply.

But it never came. Instead, he was informed of the time and location of the funeral. It was the same cemetery as Georg. Reality finally set in.

"But how?" The voice he managed to choke out was so hoarse that it didn't seem like his own. "What happened? Why did he die!?"

His colleague shook his head slowly. "I don't know the details. As far as I've heard, he died suddenly."

"Suddenly..."

"Sounds like his wife woke up next to him in the morning and found him cold, even though he seemed fine the night before. Did he have some kind of chronic illness or something?"

"Not that I've heard of."

He was a bit on the heavy side, but that was normal for a middle-aged man. He wasn't a heavy drinker, either—if anything, he was twice as health conscious as the average man. And he'd died out of the blue, just like Georg.

*Why does this keep happening to people around me? What the hell is going on here?*

As he held his head in his hands, Freddie heard the chiming of a bell from somewhere. It was the dark, solemn chime of a funeral procession. He had definitely heard it somewhere before.

"Stop it..."

He covered his ears, his colleague looking at him in confusion.

"What's wrong? Aren't you feeling well?"

"A bell. I can hear a bell."

"Bell? Hey, are you okay? I can't hear anything like that."

Freddie's colleague stared at him, a mask of suppressed repulsion plastered to his face.

"Are you sick, too? Maybe you should go home, then. Not like anyone can get anything done today, anyway."

"No, I'm fine."

He brushed off the colleague as he tried to send him home under the pretence of caring. Freddie had to be here until Catherine came.

"Fine. Could you go to the president's office, then?" the colleague asked, overpowered, as Freddie glared at him. "Sounds like there's something he wants to talk to you about."

"Talk to me? The president?"

"I'm guessing it has something to do with the next planning meeting."

*Ohh, right.* Freddie was secretly despondent. Now that both the programmer and the producer were gone, they would have no choice but to disband the project. And after all that trouble he'd taken to bring the proposal almost to completion, too. Freddie dragged his heavy legs in the direction of the president's office.

"Excuse me."

He knocked on the door. After being ushered inside and receiving words of condolence regarding Daryl, however, he received an unthinkable proposition.

"How about it? Want to try out being a producer this once?"

Taking a seat in the indicated chair, Freddie ruminated on the meaning of the president's words.

"I've had a read through your proposal. I found it to be very interesting."

The president must have been given a temporary version of the proposal that he'd handed in to Daryl before.

"It would be a shame to simply dissolve the project. I would like you to take it over. What do you think?"

The president gazed at him with evaluating eyes. Freddie was painfully aware that he saw him as no more than his own personal money tree, but if anything was grateful for how plain it was. All he had to do was get on board. Why did he have to let this chance to climb the ladder pass him by?

"I'd love to," he answered with zero hesitation. The president nodded with satisfaction at the excited-sounding response.

"I won't speak ill of the dead, but Daryl was more than a little conservative. I hope a young man such as yourself will come up with some innovative ideas and make plenty of good games."

*Good games. 'Games that sell well' is what he really means. Then leave it to me. I know my proposal will do it. I made it with Catherine, after all.*

Suddenly, he was hit by a stab of unease.

"So, uh, what about the project members?"

"I'll leave that to you. Go ahead and use whichever personnel you think you need as producer."

"Th-thank you."

Freddie bowed his head. If he'd been ordered to, he might even have licked his shoes.

He could go on working alongside Catherine. That alone lifted his spirits.

*I'll have her work under me as the main planner. Better tell her tonight.*

"Excuse me, then."

He left the president's office, trying with all his might not to pump his fist in the air. The president's secretary

watched suspiciously. He did his hardest to adopt a serious expression, hurrying into the men's toilet. Once inside a stall, he exploded with triumph.

*I did it. This is thanks to you, Daryl. I'll bring a nice big bouquet to your funeral.*

He felt like all of the disasters up until now had been turned around into an unexpected success.

*Right. So I'm a producer. Right.*

He envisioned Catherine's joyous face when she heard the news.

"Catherine. Ahh, Catherine."

*You are my angel after all. Hurry up and get here soon. Be happy with me.*

His world had changed since Catherine had appeared. The nightmares aside, he couldn't help but feel as if in real life, the whole world conveniently revolved around him. Freddie had never looked forward to nightfall so much before in his life.

✤

"Hey. About this selling point..." Catherine said, skimming the file that was displayed on the monitor. She and Freddie, his hand placed on her slender shoulder, were thinking up ideas for the proposal.

They were the only two in the silent office. The next door team had gone home early tonight. In the wake of the successive occasions of mourning, the president had ordered them to go home. Freddie hadn't obeyed, however. He stayed behind, watching his colleagues leave as they cast strange looks at him yet left without saying a word.

He had waited in the abandoned office for a few hours. Then, finally, the one he'd been anxiously awaiting had appeared.

"Hey, Freddie."

Catherine walked towards him, the clicking of her heels echoing. She, waving lightly at Freddie, was the only one in this shifting world who hadn't changed since they had met. As expected, she clapped her hands with glee when he announced the gist of his promotion to producer to her.

"Then we'd better celebrate, huh?"

*Ahh, Catherine. You really are the greatest.*

The hand that rested on Catherine's shoulder slowly slid down towards her chest.

"No. Later."

Her lips smiled teasingly. It took all of his strength not to devour them. The night was long. The more he restrained himself, the sweeter she would surely taste.

"I tried making a document to go with the proposal. Wanna check it out?"

She sent the data to Freddie's PC. He clicked his mouse to open the Word file, and a sketch of a room was displayed on the monitor. It was a document for the "Peeping Tom Dating Sim (Temp.)" they'd planned together.

"A sketch of the house of the character who gets peeped on. How about something like this?"

The game's characters were to be another man's wife in her twenties, and a male protagonist to serve as an avatar for the player who would have trysts there with her. The premise of the game was that the player would set up hidden cameras around the house through which to record, meaning that they would naturally need a carefully-modelled house to serve as the setting. That was what Catherine had done a rough sketch of.

"It's not bad," Freddie replied, looking at the screen.

It fitted the criterion that there would need to be a certain number of rooms in order to lend some variety to the locations in which the liaisons took place, and would give the players more fun in thinking of where to place the cameras. Bathroom. Kitchen. Study. Garage. There would be plenty of immoral situations to enjoy in those places.

"This... isn't your house, right?" He couldn't deny that at least some hope was mixed in with his question to Catherine.

"Hey. Of course it's not."

"...Of course."

Rejected so easily, he gave a wry smile. It was only data for a game. She'd probably just gone searching around on an estate agent's site and pulled a sketch of a fitting house for sale.

But wait. Freddie's finger stilled on the mouse wheel. As he looked at the drawing, he began to feel a strange sense of déjà vu. Something wasn't right.

"What is this?"

But he didn't know why.

"What's wrong, Freddie?"

"It's nothing."

He pressed the tips of his fingers against the inside corners of his eyes and massaged. He must be tired after all. He couldn't remember having a good night's sleep at all recently.

"Hey..."

He looked up and saw Catherine staring at him from his side. Drawing her shapely shoulders close, she reached out her fingers and combed them through Freddie's messy fringe.

"Are you really tired? Did something happen?"

"I, uh... Something did, I guess..."

Georg's death. Daryl's death. He couldn't help but feel like they were connected to him in a way that transcended work colleague and boss. Maybe that was why Freddie's heart was so heavy.

And then there was Stella. It always led to him thinking about her. What had been her relationship with Georg? He wanted to question her about it, but he was afraid, too. Freddie had dumped countless women in his life, but *he'd* never been the dump-ee before.

He thought of the women he'd cast aside. How had they felt then? What would he have thought in their shoes?

"Dammit."

He smashed the mouse violently. *Don't think about something so trivial. You have Catherine now. Isn't that enough?*

"Hey, Catherine?" he asked impulsively. Once the dam burst, it wouldn't stop coming. "Will you come live with me?"

"Huh?"

"I want to be with you. Not just at work—in the morning, in the evening, and at night, too. I want to eat with you, have fun with you, sleep with you. How about it, huh?"

"Freddie..."

Catherine's eyes wavered. Her moist eyes looked as if she was thinking hard about it. Her lips parted, a small tongue peeking out and licking her dry bottom lip. She linked her little fingers. Momentarily she drew back, but right away surrendered herself to Freddie.

Their eyes met. He'd told countless women that he loved them. He'd voiced those convenient, empty words they wanted to hear, never knowing what love actually was. What he had never said was *I like you*.

*She's the woman I've been searching for.*

"Catherine..."

*I like you.*

Before he could speak, his phone rang as if it had been waiting for that precise moment.

*Why now, of all times...?*

He tried to ignore it, but today alone he had forgotten to put it on silent. A cheery cartoon melody evaporated the serious air in the room.

"Answer your phone."

Catherine puffed out her cheeks. Freddie didn't miss the hints of disappointment and relief that appeared in her eyes. She must have been anticipating what Freddie had

been about to say to her. If he let the chance slip from his grasp now, it would be gone forever.

"Catherine, I..."

But the crucial words wouldn't come out. His ringtone continued to blare. Catherine urged him again to hurry up and answer, and he reluctantly pressed the call button, pressing the phone to his ear.

"Hello?"

"It's me."

It was Stella.

"Wh-... you..."

He reflexively turned his chair around, showing his back to Catherine. He curled up like a cat, squeezing the phone to his ear.

"What is it?"

"Where are you, Freddie?"

"I'm at the office, obviously. I'm busy right now," he muttered in as small of a voice as he could. "Speak to you later," he added and tried to hang up, but Stella wouldn't allow him.

"You're having the dream, aren't you?"

He quickly decided to hang up and moved to press the button, but his hand stopped.

"What do you mean, 'the dream'?"

"Being chased by something and falling from a height. Pitiful, baaing sheep."

Suddenly, the scenes he had forgotten came flooding back. *Sheep. Yes. I was climbing up a huge rampart.* Remembering the fear of plummeting caused him to reflexively dig in his nails. His big toes curled inwards inside his shoes.

"How do you know about that...?"

"So you are having it, huh?"

She didn't seem at all surprised—if anything, she sounded as if she were receiving affirmation. It was almost

like a doctor taking the pulse of a hospital patient who had long since ceased breathing and proclaiming them dead.

"A sheep fell, right?"

"A sheep..."

"Yeah. A poor sheep. The suspension bridge broke, and he fell right before your eyes."

"Right before my eyes..."

Was that what had happened? He could clearly remember hearing the bell chiming in its tower, but still couldn't remember any of the details.

"But how do you know any of this?"

He'd never told anyone about it before, and it was impossible to see someone else's dreams.

"Freddie?"

"W-what is it?"

Freddie's body stiffened automatically at the low voice, chilly enough to have blown out from the grave. His back froze, as if the drips of sweat on it had turned to frost.

"Tonight at ten. I'll be waiting at the Stray Sheep."

"What're you talking about? You can't just make plans without me. For one, I'm still at work... Wait, you know about the bar, too?"

"If you come, I'll tell you. All about the dream."

"What?"

"I'll be waiting. Tonight at ten. The Stray Sheep."

After repeating the time and location once more, she hung up. *Goddammit. What is Stella up to...?*

He called her back right away, but was greeted only by a notice that the number was unavailable. Looking at the clock, he saw that it was 9:20PM. He could make it to the Stray Sheep in plenty of time.

In all honesty, he was creeped out. Stella's voice was colder than he could normally have imagined, almost like she had expelled all emotion. Not only that, but there was her talk of the nightmares Freddie had had. Why did she know about them? The more he thought about, it the

harder it became to find a rational explanation, his thoughts drifting off into the darkness. In any case, he knew that he couldn't just ignore it.

"Sorry, Catherine, but..." he said, turning his chair around, but no one was there. "Catherine?"

The lone monitor that had been left on, illuminating Freddie's face, was the only other thing in the empty office.

✤

The Stray Sheep didn't seem much like a woman's kind of place, thought Freddie. He resisted getting too close, but there were still times when he was away that he started to miss it. In that sense, it could be said that Stella's selection of this bar was inevitable.

He walked inside, the gloomy bell ringing as he did so. It was late at night, meaning that there were only a few groups of figures sitting at the tables, the counter vacant.

"Why, hello there," the sunglasses-wearing bartender said in greeting. As usual, it was impossible to tell what the man was thinking. Stroking his moustache with his fingertips, he watched Freddie sit down on his usual stool.

"It has been a while, hasn't it?"

"Has it?"

He couldn't really remember how long ago it had been that he'd last come here. So much was happening lately that he had no sense of chronology with regards to anything that took place anymore. He felt like he'd been there the night before, but also as if he hadn't been near the place in months.

"Beer, please." There was nothing in particular he felt like drinking, so he simply said whatever came to mind.

"Yes, yes. Coming right up."

As the bartender took out a mug, he looked over his shoulder and surveyed the bar. Stella didn't seem to have

arrived yet. Checking his watch, he saw that it was 10:03. The time she had arranged had passed.

He wondered how long would it take to get from Stella's house to this place, but suddenly felt foolish and stopped. She hadn't necessarily called him from home. Part of him was irritated that Stella would summon someone and keep them waiting, but another part was also secretly relieved that she wasn't there.

The weird things she'd said about the dream on the phone. How did Stella know about that? He was scared to ask. She'd never forcibly called him out like this before, either. He couldn't help but feel like everything about the world and those in it was warped and abnormal.

And then there was Catherine. She had suddenly vanished while he was on the phone with Stella. He had waited for a while, assuming that she must have gone to the bathroom or something, but she had never returned, and upon going to check out the women's toilet he found it empty. He tried messaging her, but there was no response. *Something must have come up that caused her to leave,* he tried to convince himself, but it bothered him that she'd mentioned nothing of the sort. Freddie wanted to believe that their relationship wasn't superficial enough for her to leave without a word.

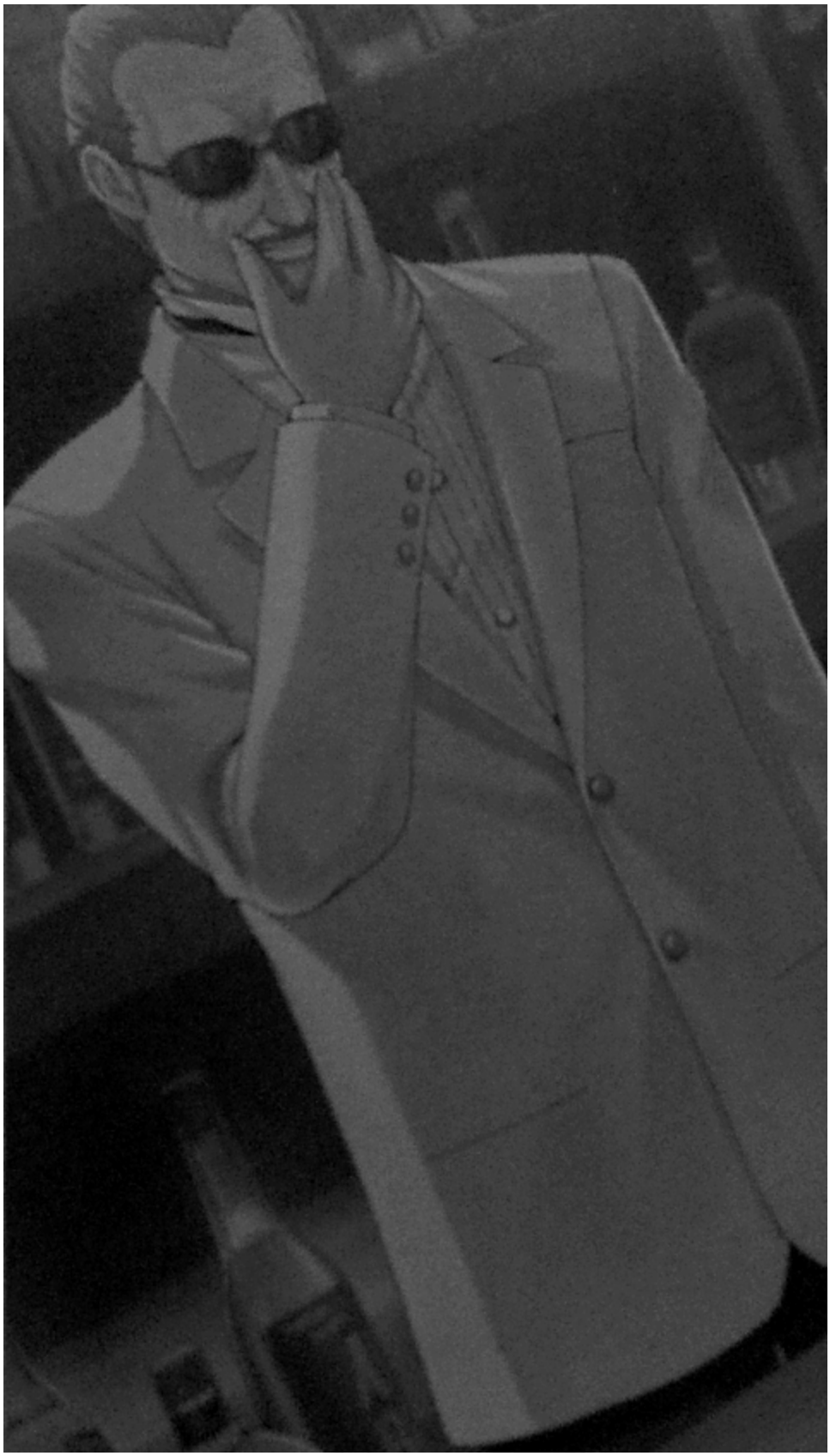
"Catherine..."

He wanted to see her. Urgently. He wanted to wrap his arms around her slender waist and exchange passionate kisses with her right now. He had already decided that he was going to be sleeping with her tonight, in any case.

Freddie tried to picture Catherine's supple, curvy body, but her devilish little face suddenly turned into Stella's blank one. Now she was even invading his daydreams. Freddie put his head in his hands and prostrated himself on the counter.

"Christ. What's happening to me?"

*Is it me who's going crazy, or is it the world?*



"Sorry to keep you waiting."

A mug was placed down on the counter. Freddie grasped it, mostly unconsciously, and gulped roughly half of it down in one go. The cold alcohol passed through his throat, seeping into the core of his body. It tasted of nothing, but that didn't matter at this point. It was more than enough to moisten his dried-out soul.

"My, my. Are you sure you should be drinking it all at once?"

"Leave me alone, would you? Another beer."

He drank down the remaining half, then slammed down the empty mug before the bartender. The bartender shrugged lightly, but poured out a second beer as Freddie had ordered.

"You look quite fatigued this evening. Is something the matter?"

"It's nothing."

The bartender's probing tone got his back up. He ignored it, picking up the fresh mug and once again drinking about half of its contents, then began to stare at the screen of the cable TV that sat on the counter without really seeing it. A news programme on the TV was playing a report about the mysterious deaths from weakness.

*"In the early hours of yesterday, a man was found dead in the bedroom of his residence at 7 Gilman Street. The deceased is Roger Greenwood, 36. According to the police, his condition resembled that of the deaths from weakness that have been epidemic amongst middle-aged men as of late, and a post mortem is to be performed in order to ascertain whether there is any connection in this case."*

What awful news. Men dying. It was always men of Freddie's age who were dying suddenly under mysterious circumstances these days. The photograph of the victim displayed on the TV screen began to look just like his own obituary portrait.

"This is all you see on the news these days," the bartender murmured. "Still so young—but life is not something that one can control. They must have had their own quandaries."

"Tch."

Freddie tutted. The bartender seemed to be talking to himself, but he knew that he was speaking to him. He became more and more irritated, but decided that perhaps it would be better to go along with the meddling barman than to watch such awful news.

"You seem like you know a lot about it, huh? Do you know something about these incidents, then?"

"Certainly not." The bartender gave an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders. "When one stands here all night long, one cannot help but hear snatches regarding what they say on the news. That is all."

"Like what, for example?"

"Hmm, yes. It seems as though the victim from the other day was in the midst of messy divorce negotiations with his wife. I understand that he had found himself a young lady friend. Quite."

"Young lady friend..."

"Precisely. The wife, angered by her husband's unfaithfulness, flew into a jealous rage and thrust the knife in deep... Oh, but I suppose that the actual cause of death is still unknown. This is what they say on the gossip shows, in any case."

The bartender readjusted the position of his sunglasses, giving him a dry smile.

"Jealousy, huh..."

Jealous, a woman killed her cheating husband. Was such a thing possible in the real world? With the women Freddie knew, instead of being jealous they seemed to find it an act of convenience to be broken up with, jumping straight onto the next man. And yet, on the other hand, they would also play the victim. There had been times when they had

openly demanded money from him. *Women must have 'shameless' etched on the inside of their skin,* thought Freddie.

"If it turns out that the cause of death was really being killed by his wife, rather than illness or something like that, maybe he was happy."

Even just once, he wanted a woman to love him enough to kill him. Ever since the day he'd witnessed his sister's stupidity, Freddie had viewed women as nightmares in the flesh. He had fled before he got in too deep, living like this for more than a decade. And now here he was, one foot—or perhaps both feet—deep.

Stella and Catherine. One woman cold and logical, the other devilish and uninhibited. He had thought that his time with Stella was almost up, but something emotional and illogical inside wouldn't let him ignore her completely. Otherwise, he would never have come to the Stray Sheep when she had called him out of the blue like that. The dream talk creeped him out, and his heart was still heavy with suspicions about her and Georg. He could've been done with all of this just by ignoring her, and yet Freddie realised that Stella had something that wouldn't allow it.

Stella Simmons, the woman who burned coldly in bed. Each time he made her gasp for breath, her long, golden hair tangled their bodies together like a spider's web. Was she capable of jealousy? What about Catherine? Had either of them experienced being so into someone that they wanted to kill them?

*I haven't, at least.*

"My. Is sir the type to make the girls cry, by any chance?"

"Nah. If anything, it's the other way around." Freddie polished off his second beer. "Do I look tired to you?"

"Yes," the bartender answered immediately. "I believe I have already mentioned this."

Nothing about this guy was considerate at all. Shouldn't he have been saying, *no, sir, not at all*, even if it was nothing more than empty flattery? It was amazing that he could make it in the service industry at all.

"You're not bartender-like at all, huh?"

"What ever could you mean?"

"I can't see you doing this as anything other than a side job. Isn't there something else you do the rest of the time?"

"Hahaha, ha. Such an amusing joke."

The bartender adjusted his sunglasses once more, chuckling awkwardly. Making it so obviously forced was like some kind of art.

"I unexpectedly took quite a liking to this line of work. Um, what I mean to say is, uh, I can't believe you would say such a thing. Hahaha."

"Haha," Freddie echoed, but wasn't finding anything amusing. The bartender, seemingly growing more and more flustered, used a handkerchief to dab sweat from his brow.

"Oh my, your mug is empty. I shall bring you another—my treat. Please don't pick on me so."

"You think you can bribe me with just a beer? Ah, screw it. It's enough to get you off the hook."

"You are too kind."

The reflection of the bartender's face in the mug as he filled it to the brim was more shaken than he had ever seen him before. Even still, he apparently managed somehow to pull himself together, and this time it was his turn to interrogate Freddie.

"By the by, what is sir's area of employment?"

"Mine? Nothing special."

"I really must know, yes."

The bartender moved his face closer. Feeling a sense of intimidation that had been completely non-existent just moments before, Freddie began to talk despite himself.

"I make shitty games for a crappy little games company."

"Ahh, games, is it?"

"And to think I was so full of hopes and dreams when I started working there. I was so sure I'd make a great game that would set the world on fire. But the division I got assigned to was godawful, and I had this moron for a boss..."

Halfway to insulting Daryl, he held his tongue. Even if drunkenness was starting to take hold, Freddie still wasn't senseless enough to speak ill of the dead.

"Anyway, there was a bunch of dumb shit and it didn't work out too well."

"I see. No, I understand."

"Is that so?" He fixed the bartender with a steady glare.

"Hahaha. But of course. It does appear as though you truly do have a talent for creating games, however."

"And you can say that how? The hell do you know?"

"Oh, no. It is mere intuition, yes. Might I ask you to kindly refrain from such truculence?"

The barman spoke ambiguously, then clapped his hands as if suddenly having thought of something.

"Oh, yes. If it would be agreeable for you, would you perhaps think of a game to have in the bar? I may not look it, but I am actually a rather big fan of video games..."

"You're not just messing me about again, right?"

"Preposterous. I am very serious indeed. I would like to ask you for a game that my customers would enjoy. You will be compensated accordingly, of course. I will let you drink here on the house for the rest of your life. What do you say?"

"Doesn't sound bad."

"Don't you think?"

"But nah."

"Oh, dear." The barman's shoulders slumped and he reeled, then added bitterly, "I don't think that is what you ought to say here."

"Give it a rest, would you? There's something I gotta do."

Until he was able to work on a game together with Catherine, he had no interest in taking on any other work.

"She is late, though."

The hand on the clock had already passed 10:30. This was unthinkable for Stella, who always turned up to meetings on time like clockwork. He had tried to downplay his rising anxiety during his chat with the bartender, but he was reaching his limit.

He took out his phone and dialled her number. It rang twice, then went to voice mail. He briefly explained that he was waiting at the Stray Sheep, then hung up. He tried texting her, too, but still no reply.

Wasn't this the same as with Catherine? He had lost contact with both of them at about the same time—could something like this happen?

He tapped his fingers on the counter. As he stood up, unable to hold himself back, to take a look outside, the bell on the door rang.

"Stella?"

No. It was a group of men he recognised. Vincent. Orlando. Jonny. They had a young man he hadn't seen before with them, too. Vincent, apparently noticing Freddie's stare, held up his right hand in greeting.

"Hey."

He was the same tired-looking guy with the same sullen expression as always. Freddie left his spot at the counter, walking straight over to Vincent and the others.

"So you're here too, huh?"

Ignoring Orlando's whistling, he asked the men if they had seen Stella.

"Stella?"

"She's a young woman with long, blonde hair. You didn't see her on your way here, did you?"

"Can't say I did," Jonny replied. Of the four, the man with the Asian features looked like the most together and

trustworthy. "I didn't see anyone on the way, and there wasn't anyone out front, either."

"Alright... sorry. Could you just let me past?"

He had no reason to doubt them, but Freddie opened the door and went outside. He surveyed the street in front of the bar. Dim streetlights. A cloudy sky. There was nothing except for the distant howling of a stray dog.

"What's wrong? Did something happen?"

As Freddie re-entered the bar, Vincent shot him a concerned look. Somehow soothed by the timid expression, he explained that he was waiting for Stella, who hadn't shown up.

"You tried callin' her?" the young man who called himself Toby asked brightly.

He answered that something about her seemed strange lately, and that she wasn't answering the phone. As he did so, the man's face suddenly turned grave.

"You must be pretty worried."

He looked like a joker, but didn't seem to be a bad kid. If anything, he simply wasn't as jaded by life as Vincent and the others, and seemed to be the warmest and most concerned of them all.

"Do you know where she lives?" asked Jonny.

"Yeah. It's not too far from here. That just makes me more worried. She should've been here ages ago."

"Maybe you should go and have a look? We can come with, if you'd like."

Orlando nodded, fiddling with the brim of his hat. "I hope nothing's happened to her."

"What d'you mean by that?"

Freddie was surprised by how emotional his own voice was. He probably wouldn't have felt a thing were it any other woman.

*Am I worried about Stella?*

Becoming aware of it made him even more restless. Orlando resettled his hat low over his eyes, as if

embarrassed by his careless remark.

"Sorry. I didn't mean anything weird by it. I'm just wondering."

"A-anyway..."

Vincent, who had been silent up until now, cut in quickly in an attempt to dispel the unrest that filled the air.

"Sitting around here talking about it like this won't do any good. Let's take a trip over to her house. That's okay with you, right?"

"...Y-yeah. Sure."

Despite feeling somewhat hesitant about the endlessly good-natured Vincent's proposal, Freddie nodded.

"Then it's settled."

Vincent called over Erica and briefly explained the situation.

"So we're popping out for a bit. Sorry for not ordering anything."

"That's okay, but..." Erica, who also seemed worried, put her hand to her cheek and looked between Vincent and Freddie. "Call me right away if something happens, alright? I'll help out in any way I can."

"...Sorry. And thanks."

Freddie bowed his head to Erica. How many years had it been since he had last uttered thanks not out of workplace obligation, but from the bottom of his heart? He had believed this to be the dullest, most boring, shitty little town, but felt truly grateful for having met Vincent and the others.

"Alright, off we go."

Jonny opened the bar door, and a sudden night breeze blew in.

"Brr. It's cold as hell tonight," Orlando grumbled, putting up his jacket collar, but Freddie didn't feel the cold. For some reason, his body was filled with an urgent sense that if he didn't find Stella right away he'd be too late, making him feel as hot as if flames were licking at his skin.

"What the hell's going on with you, Stella...?"

Forcing out the words through a bitten lip, Freddie murmured her name.

✤

Stella's house was on the outskirts of town. Travelling north alongside a dried-up riverbed with a rusted, disused electric pylon standing nearby, he went down the road right next to the used book store that had closed only the previous month, and there it was right in front of him.

It was a residential area with rows of detached, middle class family homes, the layout of the buildings making the land look as if it had been sold off as part of one big package by some real estate agent.

A two-storey house painted white. A garage and a modest garden. All of this and a lawn on which to hold barbecues must have been the selling point, he knew instantly.

"Which is her house?" Vincent asked, looking around in envy. It must be his dream to live in a house like this with a family of his own.

It wasn't Freddie's, however. All he needed was enough of a house for himself to live alone. Unwanted space would simply bring along unwanted people with it.

"The one at the end of this block."

He walked briskly along the dark road. No one was around, what with it being a residential area, but it was certainly convenient not to have people to think the men suspicious and question them.

"Here we are."

They arrived at Stella's house. Freddie climbed the mere three stone steps, standing in front of the chocolate-coloured front door that faced onto the road. He pressed the doorbell beside it.

There was no response. He waited for a moment, then pressed it again. Then a third time. Nothing changed.

He looked up at the second floor window. The shutters were down on the window of what was, if he remembered correctly, her bedroom, and he couldn't see inside. There was no sign of any light spilling out from within, either.

"You don't think she got sick all of a sudden or anything, do ya?" Toby whispered from the back of the line. He clung to Jonny's back, peering at his surroundings like a puppy.

"It's a possibility," Jonny acknowledged.

Stella, sick? He'd heard nothing of her having a chronic illness, but what if she really had collapsed inside the house?

"You got a key?" Vincent questioned, to which Freddie shook his head. He'd been there two or three times before, but had never even thought for a second about getting a key. He couldn't comprehend the mindset of a man who would *want* to set foot inside a woman's den. To him, they seemed no different from flies lured into spiders' webs simply to be helplessly devoured.

"How about trying her phone one more time?"

He went along with Jonny's suggestion, but only got her voice mail.

"God, this is a hassle. Could you move for a sec?"

Orlando brushed past Freddie and began to rap roughly on the door.

"Hellooo? Anybody hooome? It's the postman. Hellooo?"

He chattered at random as he knocked but soon shrugged, as if his hand was sore.

"Ughhh. This is pointless."

Apparently satisfied with having accomplished what he wanted to do, Orlando withdrew to the back with a silent *it's up to you guys, now*. Freddie was glad that they had tagged along, but he was no better off than if he had been alone.

"Is there a back door or something?" Vincent asked. He pictured the house inside his head, and then remembered.

"There's a door that leads straight from the garage into the house."

The garage was built as if a part of the building had been scooped out to accommodate it, and on the other side from where Freddie and the others were standing—that is, around the back of the house—you could get inside.

"Let's go check it out," Vincent proposed.

"But you don't have the key, right?"

He simply nodded in response to Toby's question, but thought he needed to check whether or not her car was there. Stella's car was a red Citroën. If it wasn't parked in the garage, that would be proof that she was out.

A narrow lane led between the houses' gardens, and they used it to access the back entrance, which felt even more deserted. The streetlights became more distant, even the moon concealed behind the clouds.

Her car had been left in the garage. The curved front end of it jutted out, unable to fit inside.

"This way."

They passed between the car and the garage wall, coming upon a stainless steel door. He turned the knob almost with a prayer, but, as he had suspected, it was locked. Freddie tutted, realising that it was never going to have been that easy.

"How about we just go ahead and bust it in?"

"Don't be stupid," Jonny chided Orlando for his crazy comment that couldn't even be called a plan.

Just as he thought they were at a dead end, Vincent crouched down in the corner of the garage. Over there were items such as a toolbox and a can of kerosene, making him think that Vincent was searching for something they could use, but apparently this was not the case.

Vincent began upturning the empty planters and flowerpots that lined the wall one by one.

"The hell are you doing?"

Ignoring Orlando's look of amazement, he continued fixating on his work, then suddenly let out a small whistle.

"Hey, is this it?"

From inside an empty flowerpot, Vincent had fished out a steel key that glinted silver. Freddie, practically snatching the key from his hand, tried it, and it slid easily into the keyhole.

"Bingo."

This time, the door that led to the main house opened without a hint of resistance.

"How'd you know, Vincent?" Jonny asked, and Vincent gave a strained smile.

"I kinda have experience with this sorta thing."

"What kind of experience?"

"There was this one time when I dropped my keys while I was out and couldn't get back in. Ever since then, I've made sure to keep a spare handy. When I was wondering where I should hide it, my girl told me to just shove it inside a flowerpot or something. I decided to give it a go, and hit the jackpot."

"So you mean it's just a coincidence," Orlando said, cutting down the boastful Vincent. Poor guy. But he was grateful to Vincent's girlfriend. He hoped to meet her someday so he could thank her properly.

Freddie went through the door and left the garage behind him, exiting into the first floor hallway. Orange lights shone down on him. Clutching at strands of his memories, he came up with a floor plan. If he turned left here and went straight he would be at the front entrance, and if he went the other way he would find himself at the stairs to the second floor. Stella's bedroom was on the second floor, so without hesitation he began climbing.

Perhaps cheaper than they looked, the wooden stairs creaked faintly underfoot each time he took a step. It summoned a horrible memory. He felt strongly as if he had

experienced the same thing before. He couldn't recall where, but he felt like it was something dangerous enough to threaten his life. As proof, each time he climbed a step, a faint sweat broke out on his forehead.

There couldn't have been more than ten steps, and yet the stairs seemed to go on for an eternity. He imagined that he was walking infinitely in the same spot. No matter how long he went, he would never make it to the top.

*This is a trap,* Freddie knew instinctively. *This is a trap Stella set for me.*

He would turn tail and run as fast as he could to the bottom of the stairs, flying straight out of the front door—the moment he decided this, he felt a tap on his back.

"Hey."

"Gah!"

He let out a shriek. Turning timidly around, he saw Vincent standing a step below with a perplexed look on his face.

"Stop standing still and get a move on, would you?"

"Standing still..."

"It's a squeeze, and we're all stuck behind you. We can't get to the second floor if you don't climb."

That was when he finally realised that he had come to a complete standstill midway up the stairs. The reason he'd felt as if he would continue climbing forever and still never reach the top was because he had been stepping on the same stair over and over. Was such a hallucination possible?

Freddie absentmindedly touched his leg. At his suspicious behaviour, Vincent grew ever more bewildered.

"Are you okay? You look really pale."

"Yeah, it's nothing."

"How about you go and rest at the bottom?"

"I said I'm fine."

In reality he wasn't fine at all, but hid it behind a humourless joke. He dragged himself along on unsteady

legs, finally making it to the second floor.

The lights on the second floor were off, but he managed to turn them on by feeling around for the switch. A dim hallway came into view, though it felt darker than the first floor had been.

The hallway was empty. The bedroom was the door inside to the left. Freddie naturally began to creep along, feeling that something was somehow off. Not knowing what that something was, he touched a portrait hanging in the hall. It was photograph-sized and sat in a small frame, depicting a young girl cradling a wreath and smiling.

It wasn't Stella; just some commonplace decoration bought from a store. Yet for some reason it caught his interest, and so he took the portrait down from the wall and scrutinised it.

"What're you up to?" Orlando asked, nudging him in the back.

"Oh. Sorry."

Freddie returned the portrait to the wall. Orlando was right—looking for Stella was more important right now than snooping around her furniture. For some reason, though, the portrait's position and angle bothered him. Concealing his mysterious feeling of unease, he knocked on Stella's bedroom door.

"Stella? You in there?"

There was no reply. He pressed his ear to the door, but couldn't hear a sound.

"I'm coming in."

The door was unlocked. Using his memories as a guide, he ran his hand along the wall and felt for the switch.

"Ugh."

"What the hell?"

Even before Freddie had time to groan, Orlando, peering in from behind, gave a peculiar cry.

He didn't blame him. Newspapers and magazines lay scattered across the entire bedroom floor. Some were piled

up into a small mountain, enough to render the carpet below invisible. Stella had never been very good at keeping things tidy, but even for her this was awful.

Some of the papers and magazines were torn up, pages missing here and there, with scraps piled in the corner of the room like a blizzard of paper.

"She thinking of starting a school play or something?"

Freddie stood completely still in front of the room, unable to take a step, and Orlando went inside instead. He took a look around the room and shrugged.

"Nobody here."

The words finally gave him the determination to move his feet and go in. The bedroom was as he remembered it. Her bed was to the right of the door, with a closet alongside it. In front of him was the window with the slatted shutter that faced the street, which was tightly locked from the inside.

Against the wall opposite the bed were a desk and bookcase. Atop the wide, wooden desk sat a notebook PC and several documents that seemed to be work-related.

The sheets showed no traces of the bed having been slept in. He steeled himself and opened the closet, but all that hung inside were several dressing gowns.

"Where the hell has she gotten to?"

He still couldn't shake the fear that she was collapsed in some other room.

"Shouldn't we check the first floor, too?"

Vincent apologetically raised his hand at Toby's words. "Sorry, but could I use the restroom before we do that? It looks like things have cooled off a bit, so..."

He stood pigeon-toed, clutching his groin.

"Bathroom's on the first floor. Go down the stairs, and it's the door next to the kitchen," Freddie answered calmly, and then stopped.

"What's wrong?"

He couldn't hear Jonny's voice. He had definitely said the location of the bathroom—he had used it a few times when Stella had brought him here—but how did he know that the kitchen was next to it? He had no memory of ever having opened the door, or of Stella telling him about it.

*How do I know the layout of Stella's house?*

Feeling eyes on him, Freddie reflexively turned around. The girl in the portrait that hung in the hall on the other side of the open door was staring straight at him.

"…!"

He let out a voiceless scream. The moment his eyes met with those of the girl in the photo, Freddie understood everything.

*"A sketch of the house of the character who gets peeped on. How about something like this?"* he remembered Catherine say. The location of the hidden camera as detailed in the proposal was right where the portrait was.

The diagram Catherine had brought him— *it was this house.* That was how he had remembered where the dining room was. Of course he had—he'd only seen it a mere two hours or so earlier at the office. Now he knew the source of the strange feeling that had been tailing him since he'd entered the house. It made Freddie feel even more anxious. How had Catherine known the layout of the house?

*No, wait.* Freddie desperately racked his brain. It wasn't inexplicable. Catherine had said that she trawled through estate agents' sites and had chosen a blueprint at random. It had just happened to be this house. It was a built-for-sale home, after all, and the contractor would have built many just like it. It could all be explained away as a coincidence. He decided not to think about what the chances were that it was one. Whatever the case, there was no connection between Catherine and Stella.

"There's no way there would be."

"Hm? What's up?"

It appeared as though he had unthinkingly uttered those final words. Freddie, flustered, shook his head at the quizzical Jonny.

"It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

"Wh... Take a look at this."

Toby, who was checking out the desk, waved them over. Opening the notebook PC, it seemed as though a note scrap had been slipped inside. Scribbled on it in what was clearly Stella's hand was simply *I wish for death.*

"That doesn't sound great..."

Toby didn't have to tell him that. It almost seemed to embody Stella's unstable mental state, shakily written and at times with the pen pressed hard enough for it to bleed through to the other side.

He tried to boot up the notebook PC itself, but it asked for a password and refused to start. He tried entering any words he could come up with, but it was futile.

He gave up and fished around in the desk drawers. The topmost drawer contained a photo that sat face down in its frame, which Freddie casually flipped over. Instantly, he regretted doing so. It showed Stella and Georg standing side by side. It looked like a park somewhere, and seemed to have been taken quite some time ago—Stella's hair only reached her shoulders. Her arm was wrapped around Georg's, and she wore an expression of contentment that Freddie couldn't ever remember having seen on her. Georg, too, didn't look unhappy, with a clumsy smile on his face.

So Stella *had* been with Georg. He felt like he'd been whacked with a crowbar. The world was warping and changing. Freddie clung to the edge of the desk, somehow fighting the urge to collapse, surprised by his own emotion. Was your woman simply dating another guy really as shocking as this? From Freddie's perspective, it was unthinkable. Up until now, he was sure he would simply have tossed her aside without a care—if anything, it would have been convenient for him. He had planned to break up

with Stella soon. Why, then, was she the only one who could make this much of an impact on him?

And he had fallen for Catherine, too, so it wasn't as though he could condemn Stella. It made no sense, but he couldn't stem the pain that welled up within his chest.

"Is something wrong?"

He felt Jonny approaching and tossed the photo frame back into the drawer, closing it. He didn't want anyone else to see that picture.

"Huh? What's this?"

Toby, who had been investigating the waste basket beside the desk, looked up. In his hand, he held a pregnancy test box.

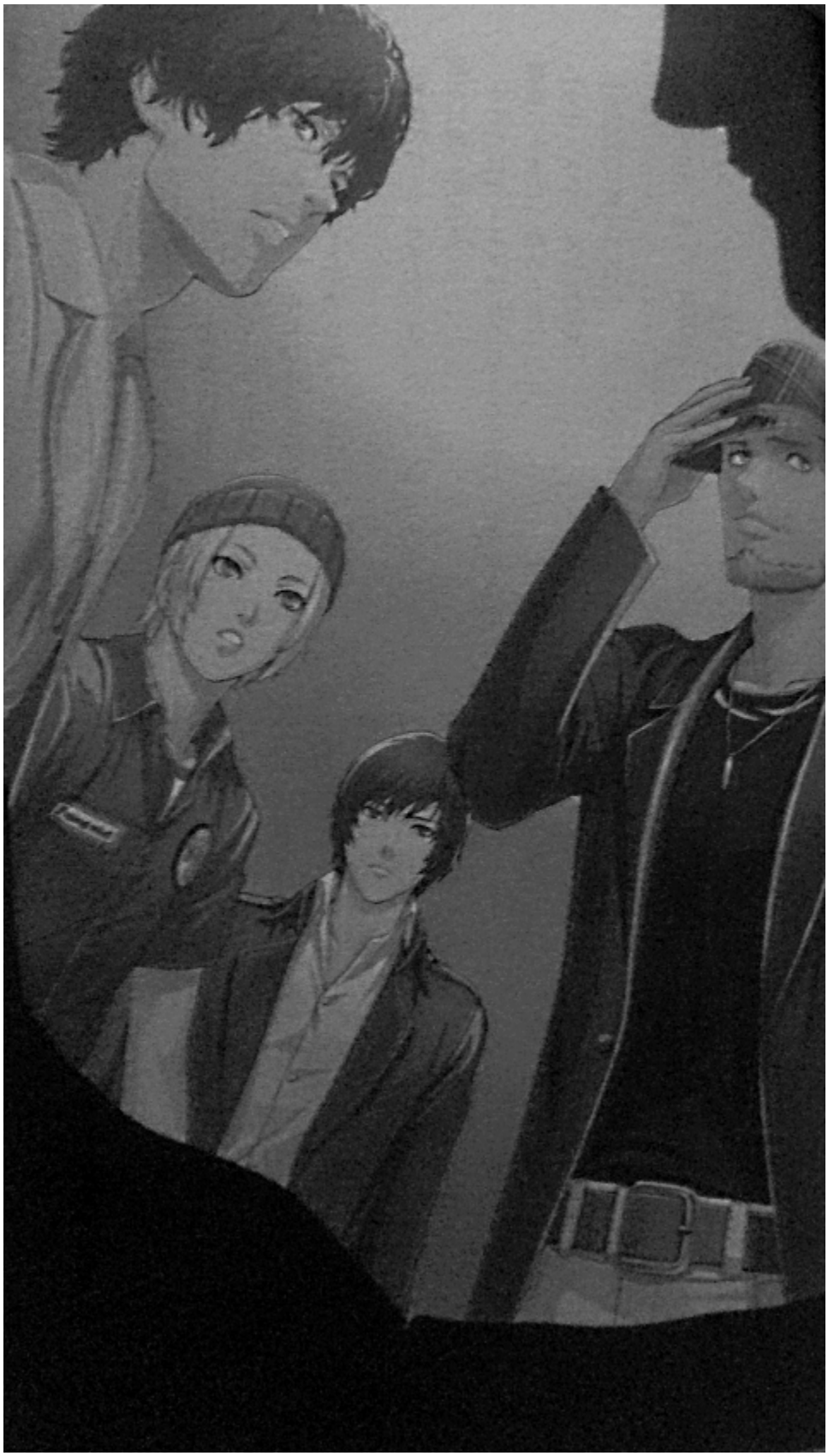
"Dumbass. Throw that away," Jonny scolded, and Toby hurriedly tossed it back into the bin. Freddie watched absentmindedly, losing more and more of his grip on his emotions.

Stella was having a kid? No way. The father... it had to be Georg, didn't it? It was unthinkable. He didn't *want* to think about it.

*Nothing makes sense anymore. What's going on? Someone, please, tell me.*

"Take a look at this."

Vincent and Orlando, who had been looking around the first floor on their way to the bathroom, returned. The enthused Vincent held out a notebook.



"I found it in the study downstairs. This is pretty weird."

Opening the notebook, he found the pages to be smothered with clippings from newspapers and magazines. All of them were articles related to the deaths from weakness that he had heard of recently. The scraps that covered the floor of the room, too, seemed to have been collected inside the notebook.

"What the hell was Stella doing with something like this?"

Taking the notebook from Vincent, Freddie quickly scanned through it. The collection encompassed even some rather detailed articles, as well as handwritten notes that appeared to have been quoted from internet message boards.

"This..."

His hand stilled on the final page and began to tremble slightly. Upon it were several clippings of articles announcing Georg's death.

*Programmer Mysteriously Dies From Weakness*
*Are the deaths from weakness a witch's curse? Exclusive emergency interview with a popular fortune-teller*
*The Tragic Bachelors: Infected with a New Type of Virus?*

Amidst the series of sensationalist yet credible headlines, at the bottom of the page was a comment in red in Stella's handwriting: *The nightmare's revenge.*

✤

Freddie carried himself back to his apartment on shaky legs. He collapsed onto the bed in the pitch black room, not bothering to turn on the light or get changed. Feeling as if his body was nailed to the hard mattress, he didn't feel like he could take another step.

He had never found Stella in the end. He had searched every inch of her house, and yet she was nowhere to be

seen, refuting Toby's theory of a sudden illness. He concluded that she must have gone out after all.

"Maybe you'd better file a report with the police?" Vincent had said, concerned, but after mulling it over he decided to wait until morning.

Of course he was worried about where Stella was, but he was similarly concerned about Catherine. How had she been so knowledgeable about the layout of Stella's house? Considering the fact that she had vanished from the office suddenly while he had been on the phone with Stella, the more he tried to pass it off as a coincidence, the more obvious it became that such a thing was impossible.

Was Catherine somehow involved with Stella's disappearance? As long as this question remained without an answer, he couldn't bring himself to contact the police. In the end, he had left a note on top of Stella's work desk informing her that he was waiting to hear from her, and parted from Vincent and the others at the front entrance.

"Feel free to contact me if anything comes up."

After he had thanked Jonny, who gave him his work number, Freddie extended his right hand to Vincent.

"Thanks for helping me out."

The act came as a surprise even to him. He had never moved to shake another person's hand before. At the time, though, it was what he truly wanted to do. This Vincent guy usually looked like just another drunk, and yet just being heard out by him had felt so mentally supportive.

Vincent eyed Freddie's hand in surprise, but shook it shyly and said, "I'll be waiting tomorrow night at the Stray Sheep."

"Alright. I'll be sure to come."

"Would be nice to have a good drink together, huh?"

"We can laugh all of this off as nothing."

After a quiet smile, the two parted. Freddie turned his back to the others and began to walk. No one called out or tried to stop him. That was how men said goodbye.

"Stella. Where have you gotten to?"

The woman with the long, golden hair. Now that she was gone, for the first time he felt uneasy. There was nothing he could do to ease the anxiety that seized his heart, which he surely would not have felt were this a complete stranger. How peculiar it was for him to feel this way over a mere woman, he thought—a dreadful woman who had been two-timing him with a work colleague, no less.

"Shit."

He sluggishly pulled out his phone. It might be pointless, but he had to try contacting Stella one last time. But his hand slipped from days of fatigue, and he dropped the phone onto the floor by the bed.

"Goddammit."

He tutted and sat up reluctantly. His arm heavy like lead, he reached out and switched on the desk lamp on the bedside table. Dim light illuminated the room. For the first time, he noticed that something was unusual.

"What?"

Freddie's surroundings differed from how he remembered them. Had that magazine been lying on the floor? Why had his alarm clock fallen over? Feeling uneasy, Freddie got up from the bed. He flipped the switch on the wall, turning on all of the lights in the room.

"Ugh!"

The terrible sight that had been masked by the darkness was revealed. The entire floor was covered with magazines. The closet was open, and all of the shirts that had been set on hangers inside lay at the bottom. The drawers of the work desk upon which his notebook PC sat had been left open, too.

Freddie, forgetting his exhaustion, leapt over to the desk and rifled through the bottommost drawer. He took out a black mobile bag and looked inside, letting out a subconscious sigh of relief. His passbook and ATM card were safe. His spare key was there, too.

"Wait..."

He headed for the front door and checked around it. The knob was intact, and there were no traces of it having been forced open. That meant that whoever had sneaked into his apartment had used a spare key. He fumbled around in his pocket and found his own key. Of course it was there; he'd only just used it a little while earlier. The door had definitely been locked when he arrived home.

"Then that means... that means..."

He didn't want to think it, but there was only one person besides him who had a key—Stella. He hadn't given one to Catherine yet.

"What the hell is she up to?"

So it meant this. Stella had called Freddie at work at 9:20. At the time, she had made sure to ask Freddie exactly where he was, even though it wasn't something she ever usually cared about.

At 10, he had been waiting at the Stray Sheep, which was when Freddie, tired of waiting around for her, had gone to her house with Vincent and the others. Now that he was home, it was after midnight.

"Has she just been leading me about?"

It made sense. After summoning Freddie by phone, Stella had come here. It had taken more than two hours before Freddie returned, giving her plenty of time all to herself to accomplish what she had set out to do.

But what was that, exactly? Given that his passbook and ATM card had been left behind, it didn't seem like she was after his money. Stella, as an author, was richer than he was in the first place, and she surely knew that Freddie's savings had almost run out. She would never take that kind of risk all for a couple of hundred dollars.

Or was there a personal item of some sort that she had come to retrieve? He couldn't think of anything. The things Stella had left at his apartment—a toothbrush and mug, amongst other items—were all things that could easily be

bought at the supermarket. He had another good look around the room.

"Hmm?"

Something glinting in the kitchen sink caught his eye. It was a bunch of shards of glass that had shattered into a million pieces. Someone had slammed the photo frame from his closet into the sink and broken it.

He scooped up the photograph, both sides curling from the dampness. It was a snapshot he had taken with Stella at some point at an amusement park. The pair must have been smiling at the camera, but the stains and blurs made it impossible to distinguish their faces.

"Did she do it all for this…?"

Had she really gone to the trouble of luring Freddie out and sneaking into his apartment, then digging through his closet, finding the photo and breaking it? A feeling of spite he couldn't put into words sent a chill down his spine.

Another part of him, however, didn't believe—didn't *want* to believe—that Stella had done such a thing. She definitely was a strange one, but had never been the kind of woman to act paranoid like this in the past. She was an indoors person, like Freddie, and he couldn't help but think that such active behaviour didn't fit her.

"Or did someone else do this?"

That would mean that Stella had made the appointment with him to meet at the Stray Sheep and then vanished. The only option he could think of was Catherine.

*From the phone calls and how I've been acting, Catherine knows that me and Stella are dating. Driven mad by jealousy, she waited for her to head for the Stray Sheep and kidnapped her. Then she came here, broke a photo of me and Stella, and left.*

Could it really have gone down that way? It wasn't unthinkable.

"No way in hell!" he yelled, unable to bear the thoughts that had already passed into the realm of delusion.

"Catherine's not that type of girl. You know that, right?"

Freddie's shout echoed emptily in the room, in which only he stood.

"Who'm I talking to?"

The nonsensical explanation made him crouch down, head in his hands. Everything was swallowed by a maelstrom of suspicion and confusion. Nothing was certain anymore, and he didn't even believe that tomorrow morning would come. He realised that he might be on the verge of losing his mind.

Stella. Catherine. The two women's faces appeared in his mind's eye, then vanished. Stella. Catherine. Stella. Catherine. Stella Catherine. stellacatherinestellacatherine...

"Ugh. Ahhhhh."

A sob-like cry slipped from his mouth. He wandered, zombie-like, over to the fridge and took out a beer. He tugged open the pull-tab and put it to his lips, but most of it spilled down his chin and chest, dripping onto the floor. Unfazed, he opened a second can.

He couldn't bear to be sober on a night like this. Even with the alcohol-bestowed strength, he wanted to fly away to some other world.

But there was no god in this world after all. Without even having his final wish granted and unable to sleep a wink, Freddie simply went on replaying delusions inside his head, unable even to tell whether this was a dream or real life.

✤

Freddie couldn't remember how he managed to make it to the office. He had still heard nothing from Stella. Despite knowing that he should probably report it to the police, the dull ache in his head wouldn't let him pick up the phone.

The sky outside was hidden behind dark clouds, and the unending night continued. By this point, he had even lost all sense of time. Perhaps it was because he felt as if he would be able to live a normal day in the controlled environment of the office, then, that his body dragged itself in to work.

He managed to robotically punch his time card and drag his stumbling legs to his seat, but that was his limit. Wondering if the world had turned a dull grey, he slumped down into his chair. Faint anaemia meant that he didn't even feel like starting up his PC. How much time had passed since then?

Freddie realised that someone was calling him. He weakly lifted his head, heavy as though he had been made to wear an iron collar, and saw his colleague's face.

"Did you finish the game proposal? The president says he wants to see it."

"Yeah."

It was so tiresome that he could hardly stand it, but work would make no exceptions for Freddie's situation. Hurried along by his colleague, he begrudgingly booted up his machine. The scratching sound the harddisk made as it loaded made him feel like insects were crawling around under his skin, and he felt disgusted.

He clicked its icon on the desktop and started up Word, then opened the document file containing the new proposal.

"Here you go."

"Let's have a look."

The colleague peered over from beside him, but suddenly frowned.

"This isn't the time to be screwing around. The president wants you to bring the documents to him right away."

"So I just have to make a copy of this, right?"

"Exactly what part of that file do you intend to copy?"

Feeling a sense of unease at his workmate's confused expression, Freddie finally focused on the screen. Written on the first line was simply: '*New proposal. (Innovative) dating sim,*' and the rest was blank. He used the mouse to scroll down the screen, but there was nothing.

"Oh, I must have opened the wrong file."

He closed the file with an awkward laugh, using the explorer to check through his work folder of proposals he had created in the past. There was only one file, and it was the one he had just opened. He looked at the timestamp, and saw that the last revision had been made several days earlier.

"No way."

A sinking anxiety pooled in the pit of his stomach. Had he deleted the file by mistake? He checked the recycle bin, but it was empty. He and Catherine had completed it together—this was impossible.

"Right. I must have a backup."

He started up the machine on the neighbouring desk that Catherine had used, but was thwarted by its request for a password.

"Sorry. Could this wait until Catherine gets..."

Freddie was halfway through apologising to his colleague when he noticed the man tilting his head to one side and stopped, his words trailing off into nothing.

"Who's Catherine?"

The unexpected response left him speechless. "Who? Catherine, the temp, obviously."

So the man didn't know Catherine? They worked in shifts, after all, so maybe they simply hadn't met yet.

Once he had explained the circumstances, the other man folded his arms in growing suspicion.

"I really don't know any girl like that. This desk has been vacant ever since Georg died. Look, here's the proof."

He opened the drawers, showing that they were all empty.

"No way."

Freddie had witnessed Catherine using the desk several times. He'd seen her indiscriminately tossing in half-eaten chocolates, a handmirror and more and laugh.

"Why's it empty?"

"Why? Didn't you clean out Georg's things? Of course it's empty."

The colleague's misgivings about Freddie were now clearly displayed upon his face. Plastering a vague smile to his lips, he casually withdrew a step backwards.

"Wait." Freddie stood, grabbing onto the colleague's suit collar to stop him from fleeing. "Where... Where is Catherine?"

"I told you; I don't *know* any woman like that. Check out the time cards if you don't believe me."

Everyone who worked here, regardless of whether they were a full employee or a temp, was required to punch in and out. No exceptions were made, not even for the president.

Freddie did as he was told, checking though the time card folder next to the office entrance one by one.

"...It's not here."

Catherine's name was nowhere to be seen. It was proof that as far as the company was concerned, she didn't exist.

"Is this some kind of joke?"

He'd seen her here just last night. Not only last night, either; they had gone over the plan here together on several occasions. He had embraced her, and they had shared a passionate kiss. Did that mean that it had all been a dream?

He ignored his colleague calling him back and flew out of the office, taking out his phone just before the elevator hall. If he could make contact with her, he could clear all of this up. Everything would be okay if he could simply hear her voice.

But.

"It's... it's not there."

Catherine's number was gone, and her email address had vanished from his history, too. It was almost as though she had never existed at all.

"I don't get it. What the hell is going on?"

He checked over and over, but it made no difference. The only person he'd been in contact with recently was Stella. Catherine's name was completely absent. Morning must never have come after all. Freddie was still trapped inside a nightmare that would follow him wherever he went.

"Catherine... Catherine..." he muttered incoherently. A female employee got out of the elevator, and he grabbed her by the shoulder, pressing her. "Have you seen Catherine?"

"Eek!"

"Catherine. You must know her. Right? You do, don't you?"

The girl shook her head, looking as though she were about to burst into tears. Freddie loosened his grip, and she fled with a grimace.

"Why don't they know? They must!"

Of course. There was no way they would meet someone so bewitching and just forget about her. All of the employees here were idiots.

"Catherine... Right."

He would take another good look at the desk—not just Catherine's, but his, too. There had to be *something* left behind that would prove her existence.

Upon returning to his office, everyone saw Freddie coming and got out of the way. Sending people scattering either side of him like Moses, he made his way to his seat.

He searched through the folders on the PC and opened the desk drawers, turning their contents out onto the floor. Supplement pills spilled out from a bottle with a loose cap,

and he ignored them as they crunched underfoot. *There must be* something —*something to link me and Catherine.*

As he opened the topmost drawer, a silver glint caught Freddie's eye. He snatched it up, and found that it was a silver rosary.

"This... it can't be."

He had found it when he was tidying up Georg's things. He had originally meant to send it to Georg's family along with his other belongings, but had hesitated and had forgotten to sort it. He had to ask Stella up front about it—about her relationship with Georg. How much did his death mean to her? Now wasn't the time for that, though. He stuffed the rosary into his trouser pocket and went back to searching for evidence of Catherine.

It was all in vain. Even though the two of them had shared such profound time together over the past few days, there wasn't a single trace of her on the PC, his phone, or the desk.

"...Someone tell me. Anyone. Am I dreaming, or is this real life?"

No one responded to Freddie's murmur. His colleagues all simply watched silently from a distance. Someone was making a call on their mobile phone. *Personal calls are forbidden during work hours—why are they looking at me while they talk?*

Freddie sat still in his chair, watching intently as the seconds ticked by on his watch. All he could do now was wait for night to fall. When night fell, she would surely come.

✤

Believing this and heading for his desk, he stepped on something. He bent down and scooped up what appeared to be one of a pair of earrings.

It was a small, red glass butterfly with its outlines picked out in silver. It seemed to have fallen out along with the bottle of supplements when he had tipped out the drawer.

...He recognised the red butterfly. Holding it in his palm, he had a flashback to a nightmare he had once had.

"Right. Back then..."

The high, high ramparts. The long, long staircase. Running for his life from something chasing him. The thing that slithered after him. The faceless woman. This earring had been in her ear.

"...Sophie?"

The forgotten name spilled forth like water from a blocked tap. A woman he had dated long ago. She was the red-headed vocalist of a no-name rock band. She'd said that the first day they'd slept together had been her birthday, and so he had bought her a pair of cheap earrings on a whim. When he and Sophie broke up, she had thrown them against his chest and turned on her heel. Although it had been summer, the day was faintly chilly and rainy.

"What's something like this doing here...?"

*"Freddieeeeeee!"*

He recalled her scream, like nails scraping against glass. *It was a fuzzy-faced Sophie who tried to kill me in my dream. No doubt about it.*

It had been some sort of revelation within a dream. Events that happen in real life are picked up by the human instinct and streamed to the memory via dreams. Thinking of it that way would explain it.

*Maybe Stella's disappearance was Sophie's doing, too. She was a jealous woman. When we walked along the street together, if I so much as looked at a woman we passed she'd say with a laugh that she'd kill me.*

The earring of a woman whose very existence he had forgotten. He could only imagine that it showing up here and now in a place like this was Sophie trying to make a

display of herself. Such an ugly, egotistical lump of flesh she was. He had forgotten about her for all of this time—why was she showing up now?

"Wait. What if she got Catherine, as well…?"

Perhaps it was also Sophie's fault that he had lost contact with Catherine. An overwhelmingly realistic image of Stella and Catherine confined in some dark basement warehouse with Sophie cackling, a knife in one hand, appeared before his eyes.

*I'm going to save them.*

He sprang into action, dialling 911.

"Hello? Is that the police!?"

Freddie rattled off a report of Stella and Catherine's disappearances to the police officer who answered, informing him that Sophie must be behind it. It was no more than simple conjecture, but as he talked it morphed into conviction.

"That's right. Sophie Mallow, 24. She's the vocalist of a band called The Crusaders. Her address... uh, I can't remember."

After they had broken up, he had deleted all records concerning Sophie. He had thought that he would never see her again, but now cursed his imprudence.

"Please, at least find out that much on your end! You're the police, so you can do that, right!? ...Huh? The reason why I think Sophie's involved?"

He was suddenly lost for words. Freddie still had enough wits about him to realise that he wouldn't be able to convince the police with talk of finding an earring or having a dream.

A silence followed, and now the policeman's tone, which had been serious up until now, was intermingled with suspicion.

"I'd like to hear more specific details," he said. "Please tell me your name, address and telephone number."

"Frederick... Uh, wait."

He hesitated in giving his name. As the call went on he grew calmer, and began to wonder if he wasn't spouting complete nonsense. For starters, it wasn't even certain that Stella and Catherine were actually missing. This certainly wasn't the type of incident that the police could do anything about. It was all to do with his own nightmares, after all. He declined the request to come to the station, making the excuse that he was working, and hung up.

There was another reason for his saying no—he didn't want to be tied up until the night. Catherine might show up as usual tonight, as if nothing had happened. If he missed her because he'd gone to the police, he would regret it for the rest of his life. He had to stay until nightfall. He had to stay until he saw Catherine.

*Sorry. Doesn't look like I'm going to be making it to the Stray Sheep tonight,* Freddie apologised mentally to Vincent and the others, then wondered whether there was anything else he could do.

"I do want to know where Sophie is..."

Checking his phone's address book, he realised that it contained the phone number of the club where he and Sophie had met. The Crusaders had often made use of the cramped bar, and he might be able to get some kind of clue out of it. With a prayer, he made the call.

"Yes?" said a curt voice. He guessed that it belonged to a middle-aged man on the wrong side of forty. He hesitated over how to broach the subject, but strengthened his resolve and decided to come straight out with it, saying that he was looking for Sophie Mallow and asking the man if he knew her whereabouts.

"Sophie?" The other man's tone shifted. "Who are you?" he probed, a mixture of surprise, confusion and caution in his words. "A friend of Sophie's?"

He responded that he was an old friend, using the name of George. "We were classmates in junior high. We're having a reunion next month, and Sophie's the only one I

haven't been able to get hold of. I'm trying to find someone who can help me reach her."

The fabrication slipped so easily from his lips that he even surprised himself. Freddie's voice sounded younger than he actually was, and the man believed him readily.

"Oh, I see. You won't be able to see her, though, I'm afraid."

"So you don't know where she is?" He clicked his tongue.

"That's not what I meant." The man let out a deep sigh. "You really don't know?"

"Know what?"

An ominous feeling welled up within him. He felt cold, sharp wires creeping inside the soles of his shoes, up through his legs and into his heart.

"Sophie's probably in Heaven right about now. ...Or maybe Hell, I guess."

The man let out another sigh. He could almost smell the odour of alcohol on his breath through the receiver.

"She was hit by a truck. It was awful. Her whole lower half was torn off, and she died instantly."

"Wha..."

Sophie was dead. Freddie's body stiffened at the realisation. The man went on talking, but he could no longer hear him.

✤

*"Sophie Mallow, 24. Female. Was attempting to cross the road at 00:20 on April 4 on her way home from her part time job when she was struck and killed by a large truck that ignored a red light."*

The article that Freddie had found from an internet search backed up the man's story, shattering Freddie's suspicions at their very core. Sophie had nothing to do with

Stella's disappearance, nor Catherine's. That was because Sophie had died almost a week earlier.

Yes—that night when he had first had the nightmare. When he had awoken in a bad mood to news showing on the TV in the background, which he had ordered Stella to turn off, the reporter had been announcing Sophie's death in an accident. Subconsciously not wanting to watch, he had switched it off. Or perhaps he had actually heard the initial report of the accident before he had gone to sleep?

A familiar road crossing was displayed on-screen. A young, red-headed woman had been in a hit-and-run there. It would have been easy to connect the dots and realise that Sophie had been the victim, but Freddie was so caught up with Stella that he hadn't been listening. Up until now, he had completely forgotten about it all. Or maybe, shaken by the death of a woman he used to date, his feelings of guilt in wanting Stella's body instead of mourning Sophie's death had brought on the nightmares? Not that any of this went beyond speculation, of course.

"Then I'll have it again tonight."

He was going to put an end to this dream. If there was anything Sophie wanted to say, he was all ears. In exchange, he would ask for Stella's release, since she had nothing to do with it.

"N-no, wait."

*Stella really has vanished. Didn't I only just determine that it had nothing to do with Sophie's death? What the hell am I thinking?*

It didn't make sense. Was this reality a nightmare, or was the nightmare encroaching into the real world? The situation rejected any plausible theories Freddie could come up with, the worlds beginning to melt together and run into chaos. Freddie was all alone in his dark world.

"Catherine..."

He couldn't even hear his own murmur. Even still, Freddie kept begging. *Please. Even if it's just you, show*

*yourself to me. Let me hear the sound of your high heels clicking like always. If that's not possible in the real world, then at least come to me in the nightmare.*

"If I can climb to the top of that tall tower..."

*...will my wish come true?* he wondered.

# Chapter 4

The door shut behind Freddie. He was on the outside of a black steeple that connected to the castle ramparts. It seemed as though after passing through the golden door at the top of the massacre staircase, he had found himself outside of the castle and tower. A frigid, cutting wind tore at his feet.

"So it's begun, huh..."

It was a continuation of his last dream, but this didn't come as a surprise anymore. He was more than prepared.

The spire was a cylindrical structure built from gigantic, jet black stones, with a stone spiral staircase coiled around it. Freddie stood at the base of the spiral stairs, which joined the bottom level of the tower with the top level of the fortress. Putting his foot onto the first stair, he was seized by a feeling like something was different.

"Weird."

He couldn't see any sheep. The sheep who had blocked Freddie's path and sometimes offered him important words of assistance were nowhere to be found. Had they all fallen? The thought filled his mind, chilling his heart. So he had to face up to tonight's nightmare all alone, then?

"Perfect."

Freddie made a fist and punched his other hand in determination. *Humans are all alone in the end, after all.*

*Bwaaaaah...*

He could hear the sound of something like a foghorn in the distance. Was it coming from the top of the tower? To Freddie, it sounded like the wailing of a girl despairing at the world.

He looked up, but, as usual, was unable to see the top of the spire. The blood red quality of the sky deepened, leaving only a giant moon suspended in it like a bizarre artwork.

"But there must be an end," he muttered.

*"That's right,"* he suddenly heard a voice say.

"Who's there!?"

*"No one with a name worth knowing."*

Freddie looked around him in shock, and the voice continued as if observing him with great interest.

*"Welcome to the Spiral Corridor. Let me start by praise you for managing to make it this far."*

*Bwaaaaah...*

The foghorn went on sounding. Mingling with the sound, the voice—Freddie couldn't tell whether it was male or female, child or adult—went on speaking to Freddie.

"Stop screwing with me. Show yourself."

*"I told you; there's no need for that. I am but a mere scorekeeper. Usually I wouldn't even have a reason to be talking to you, but your climbing has been so magnificent so far that I wanted to give you a word of encouragement right at the end."*

The hint of teasing contained within the voice made him annoyed. He didn't know who it was, but knew that they had to be some sort of born trickster.

*"Hey. I have a question for you."*

"..."

*"Do you believe that a relationship between a man and a woman can evolve in a convenient way?"* the voice asked, ignoring Freddie's silence.

"The hell's that supposed to mean?"

*"Answer me. I'm interested."*

He didn't know what the point of it was, but it seemed to want Freddie to respond. He could go on ignoring it, but felt like that would simply make the other person happy,

and after thinking for a while he managed to come up with something clever.

"If I answer, you have to answer my question, too. That's my bargain."

*"Hmm. You're an interesting one, alright. Fine. I promise."* The voice from the fog sounded intrigued. *"Then let me ask you once again: Do you believe that a relationship between a man and a woman can evolve in a convenient way?"*

"I do," he answered without hesitation. If he didn't believe it, the world would surely be messed up and chaotic.

*"Hmm. So that's your answer."* As if impressed, the foghorn sound grew more shrill. *"I've taken note of it. I think I can see the silhouette of you as a person more clearly now."*

"Whatever. Now it's my turn." Freddie looked up at the sky, taking a breath before uttering the words he most wanted to know. "Where is Catherine? Where is Stella?"

*"That's not just one, now, is it?"* said the exasperated voice. *"But fine. I'll tell you. They're up there."*

"'Up there'?"

He looked up once more at the spire. It was shrouded in fog, and he still couldn't see its peak. What he had heard was enough, however.

"I'll climb up there. We'll leave together. I'll put an end to this weird nightmare."

*"I like your spirit. Go for it, then—before 'she' starts chasing after you."*

"What!?"

Freddie stood upon a slate floor about a square foot in size. The spire's spiral stairs continued on one side, but the other jutted out into empty air, and he could peer down from it.

*"Freddieeeeee!"*

A woman's shriek crawled out from the fog like hellfire.

"It's back!"

Was it really Sophie?

*"This is the beginning of the final staircase. Will you manage to scale the Spiral Corridor?"*

"Screw you. I told you I would."

Paying no further heed to the foghorn voice, Freddie began to climb the spiral staircase. However, he didn't know whether there were traps along it, just like the nightmare before. He wouldn't be able to carelessly rush upwards.

He went one step at a time, always with his left hand pressed against the tower's outer wall to support himself at all times. He had to move cautiously, of course, but still went as fast as possible. Still, he soon felt that something wasn't right.

"Am I really climbing this?"

As he climbed, the top of the fortress that lay below became enshrouded in fog, leaving him with no other structure to use as a landmark. All Freddie knew was that to his left hand side was the spire's outer wall, below him was fog, and above him was an endlessly stretching, bizarre red sky.

Even the moon that hung in the sky seemed to be chasing Freddie: no matter how far he walked, its position never changed. Hovering overhead, it seemed to be monitoring Freddie's movements.

No matter how many times he went around the spiral stairs, his surroundings stayed the same, making him worry that he was simply walking in place. It was like some kind of symbol of the endless nightmare.

Regardless, there was nowhere else to go. He felt his way along the spire walls, but found no sort of concealed door or secret path. Freddie's only hope of escape now was to either keep climbing, or to simply give up and toss himself into the abyss, leaving him with no choice but to keep walking.

*"Where are you, Freddieeee?"*

The woman was approaching the spire from below. He couldn't see her through the fog, but her malice-filled presence grew more profound.

*"There you are,"* she said, revealing herself and sending chills running down Freddie's spine. *"Don't leave meeeeee!"*

Like an ascending dragon piercing its way through a sea of fog, a long claw rose up from below and attacked Freddie. He threw himself against the wall, barely managing to evade. The claw slashed past the spot where Freddie had stood just a moment earlier, digging into the wall next to his eyes and nose.

The giant hand, roughly the size of a person, scratched along the stone wall, climbing up the side of the spire. It was definitely looking for Freddie. The clawing hand blocked off his path. Just like stumbling upon a huge fallen tree on a mountain path, he would have to pass over it in order to proceed.

"Goddammit!"

Freddie's tongue was squeezed against his lower jaw from the stress, but he decided that he would get past it. Grabbing onto the woman's wrist—the size of a large tree's root—with both hands, he slung his legs over to the other side as if climbing over a log.

*Gross...*

The woman's arm was as cold as a corpse's. The damp skin was soft like a bog, from which wafted an odour of decomposing flesh that made him want to vomit. Freddie squeezed his eyes shut, trying to force the thoughts of the thing he straddled from his mind. The woman, however, would not allow it.

*"Foooound youuuuuuu!"* she shrieked joyously, and the arm, Freddie still sat upon it, began to twist and turn. He clung on desperately, trying not to fall off, and suddenly the entire arm was lifted up into the empty air. In the blink of

an eye, the spiral staircase he had climbed drifted into the distance. Ripped away from the spire, Freddie felt like Hercules clinging to the Hydra.

Something rose, slicing through the fog. It wasn't the arm from which the claw sprouted—it was something far larger. The first thing he saw was hair, red as fresh blood. A face, too, slowly made its appearance. Her features, smothered in blackness in the previous nightmare, were now clearly visible. A wide forehead. Determined eyebrows. A narrow, pointed chin. Grey-blue eyes filled with hatred. At her white, adipocere-tinged ears glinted red butterfly earrings.

"Sophie..." Freddie murmured. He was now sure that it had been Sophie Mallow, a rock singer he had dated previously, who had been attacking him each night. "Are you dead...!?"

*"Yes, I am dead."* Sophie turned her huge, dull eyes towards Freddie. *"And it's your faaault!"*

"Wh-what do you mean? It's my fault!?"

*"Yes! It's all because of youuuuuu!"*

As Sophie screamed, Freddie almost slipped off the arm upon which he sat, clinging onto her wrist for dear life. She swung her arms wildly, like a spoilt child. The putrid odour of a corpse decaying in its grave relentlessly assaulted Freddie's lungs, but his fear of plummeting into the abyss won out.

*"It's your fault that I'm dead, so I'm going to have you die, too."*

Cracks spread across Sophie's bloodless lips and she cackled, exposing uneven teeth. She began to move her arm slowly towards her mouth with Freddie still on it. She was going to eat him. A woman was going to *eat* him.

Tears and snot began to dribble down Freddie's face. *I'm done. I'm done with all of this. I'm getting out of here. I* will *get out of here.*

Partly aware that he was on the verge of madness, Freddie bit into Sophie's arm. He'd rather chew on a corpse's arm than be eaten by a woman.

Freddie heard the popping sound of the woman's skin breaking, filling his mouth with filth. A feeling of intense nausea struck him. His stomach acid rising, Freddie removed his mouth from Sophie's arm and vomited. A black, unidentifiable substance spilled and spread from Sophie's body. Seeing it made him feel even worse.

Freddie had nothing left to bring up except stomach acid, but his bizarre act hadn't been in vain. Even in her beast-like form, Sophie still appeared to feel pain in her arm, for she pulled her face—on the verge of consuming Freddie—away from him. Her expression torn between hatred and agony, she flailed her arm wildly. Freddie clung on, trying to avoid being shaken off. A few seconds went by like this, with him tossed about as though in midair on a

swing, before the arm crashed into the spire wall with Freddie still upon it.

The impact sent Freddie flying, but his back fortunately landed on the spiral stairs. The writhing arm sent fissures shooting through the wall, fragments crumbling and falling from above. He shielded his head with his hands and got quickly to his feet. The arm flopped down in front of Freddie, as if suddenly losing its strength, before finally drawing back from the spire.

"Now's my chance."

The path was open once more. He hurried up the spiral staircase. At this point, he didn't even have time to check for traps. He had to make it as close to the summit as possible while Sophie was still nursing her wounds.

Soon, however, he began to puff and pant. He had been neglectful of his physical health. If he made it out of here alive, he swore to himself, he was going to drop his savings on a gym membership. He'd quit smoking, too—no more drinking, either. *So let me out of here.*

Clutching his chest, he continued to run, but finally his gait slowed. Panting, he put his hands to his knees, unable to take any more.

*"Don't ruuuuun!"*

In contrast to Freddie's slowed movements, Sophie seemed to have regained her strength. She had briefly sunk beneath the fog, but made a reappearance now. Her torso was clad in a leather jacket, and he could see the lower half of her body that had previously been concealed by the fog.

"Ugh!"

The instant he saw it, Freddie brought up more stomach acid.

*This is a nightmare.*

From the navel downwards, all Sophie had was exposed entrails. In place of a pelvis and legs hung tens of what could have been either intestines or tentacles, radiating outwards, each writhing like a separate organism.

*"Ms. Sophie Mallow has died after being hit by a truck that ignored a red light,"* he remembered hearing on the morning news.

*Oh, right. So that's why she looks like this.*

Freddie once again pitied Sophie, whose entire lower body had been torn away. She was a mean drunk, told lies like it was nothing and had even dabbled with drugs, but she still wasn't a bad enough person to have deserved such a death.

"Poor thing," he said, his true feelings leaking out. His eyes met Sophie's.

*"Freddie..."*

Sophie's gaze regained its sanity momentarily, but swiftly returned to its bloodshot hatred. She bared her fangs, spitting curses.

*"It's your goddamn faaaault! Die, die, die!"* She began to flail even more violently. *"You're going to die with meeee!"*

She came at Freddie, claws flexing restlessly and dangling entrails wriggling. These had been the things she had once wrapped around a poor sheep and used to drag him down into the abyss in a previous nightmare.

Freddie evaded the tentacles that leapt at him, beginning to ascend the spiral steps once more on teetering legs. There was no time to be complaining about how much it hurt to breathe, knowing that if he stopped now it would be the end of him.

The pink organ that flew at him with a roar brushed past his nose and slammed into the spire wall. It coated the floor with a gleaming fluid, and, despite being flexible, still packed an iron punch. The tip of the organ sank into the stone wall, sending cracks running outwards.

*"Don't run! Accept my looove!"*

"Fuck that...!"

*Run. Run. Run and get out of here. Climb. Climb. Climb as far as it takes.* Finally, the steps that had seemed so

endless began to draw to an end. Freddie could clearly hear the chimes of the bell tower above echoing in his ears.

"Christ, that's the goal!"

Instead of the silenced foghorn, he could hear a chorus of *Hallelujah* all around. Light flooded the bloody sky, the crimson fading and being replaced by blue. The top of the tower. A golden door came into view. Just ten more steps until the end of this dream. Nine. Eight.

*"Freddieeee!"* Sophie screamed. *"Don't leave me!"* By now, she was pleading.

Seven steps. Six steps.

Freddie ignored her and ran.

Five. Four.

*"Noooooooo!"*

Sophie's right arm swung at Freddie's side, trying to snatch him up, but he somehow managed to dodge it. The claw fell away in futility, leaving gouges in the tower's outer wall. Beneath the golden light, the marks seemed to spell out *LOVE*.

*...Sorry. You can't stop me now.*

"Goodbye, Sophie."

Three steps. Two. One. And...

✤

"You made it!"

The moment he climbed up the final stone step, Freddie was greeted by applause.

"...Catherine?"

It wasn't a hallucination. The real Catherine stood there beside the door. She continued clapping, her expression unreadable. So the voice had been right when it had said that he could see her if he made it to the top.

"Th-thank God. Catherine..."

Freddie spread his arms out, going in for a hug, and Catherine extended a slender finger. "Hm? What're you

doing?"

The finger pointed behind Freddie. He turned, and there he saw Sophie. Even though she had been such a terrifying presence that it froze his very soul just moments before, now she simply looked so pitiful that it made him sad.

"Isn't it obvious?"

He gripped the knob of the golden door and twisted without hesitation. A holy, pure white light spilled forth, swallowing Sophie behind him.

*"Ah... Ah... Ah..."*

Sophie reached out, screaming, trying to cling onto Freddie. He took a step back and dodged her.

*"Ahhhhhhhhhh!"*

A single tear spilled from Sophie's eye. *...Freddie,* said the familiar sweet voice from when they had dated, and then she vanished along with the light.

"...I did it," Freddie murmured in a daze. Was the nightmare over? For real?

"Basically, yeah." Catherine nodded. "Not that I ever expected you to make it this far, if I'm being honest."

Her words brought him back to earth. "...What are you? This is a dream, right? Are you from the dream world, then?"

Freddie didn't consider that all of this might be a delusion of his within a dream. Catherine existed here so vividly.

"Yeah. I'm a succubus. I decided on a whim to help out with this plan."

"Succubus? Plan?"

He didn't know what Catherine was talking about, but Freddie did understand that what she was going to tell him would explain the root of the bizarre phenomena that had been occurring around him over the past few days. He waited in silence for her to go on.

"I'm a succubus," Catherine repeated in a singsong voice. "I seduce human males and cull those who get in the

way of the plan. This nightmare is a device *he* made for that purpose."

"'He'?"

"Thomas Mutton. You know him, right?"

"No, I don't." Freddie shook his head. The name didn't sound familiar.

"Oh, right. So you don't know." Catherine let out a chuckle. He'd thought her habit of putting her hand to her mouth when she laughed devilish, but never that she might be an *actual* demon.

Even still, just as Freddie had always felt, Catherine remained bewitching.

"The sheep fell, right?"

"Oh..."

The sheep who had vanished, slipping or falling prey to Sophie. Their dying screams were still seared into his eardrums.

"They were humans, just like you."

"So they were after all. What about Sophie, then? She died ages ago. Did her death have something to do with this nightmare, too?"

"No. Only human males are culled here. Her death was a pure accident. That means the thing that appeared was all created by your mind."

"What?"

"It's a manifestation of your subconscious feelings of guilt for dumping her. The thing that appears is different for each sheep, but they all try to kill you and make you atone for your sins."

"What sin are you saying I committed? I feel bad about Sophie, but it's honestly not like I feel all that guilty about it."

"You're always such a bad liar, Freddie." Freddie couldn't tell whether Catherine was looking at him with sympathy or pity. "Hearing of her death on the news really did shock you to your core. You've been blaming yourself all

this time, wondering whether she might be alive now if you'd been living together instead of breaking up with her."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't thought anything like that for a second."

"I'm telling you; I'm talking about *depth psychology* here."

"'Depth psychology'? You mean that I'm unconsciously trying to punish myself, and that's why Sophie's been chasing after me every night?"

Maybe she was right. Freddie had denied it, but had wondered the same deep down. He couldn't say for sure that he didn't feel a sort of want to atone for Sophie.

"Well, this device was created to draw out that kind of emotion, anyway. His shittiness shows right through." Catherine tutted lightly. He approached and gripped her slender shoulder.

"So Sophie, she... she's resting in peace, right?"

"Probably. It's outside of my jurisdiction, but I haven't heard of her becoming a ghost or anything, so I guess so."

"Right..."

From start to finish, Sophie had never been anything to do with this. All she must have wanted to do was sleep peacefully, and he felt apologetic for having dragged her into his nightmares.

"I'll go and visit her grave soon."

From Sophie's point of view, there would be no sense in the guy who dumped her bringing her flowers, but he still wanted to at least send her a prayer. That was Freddie's way of making things up to her.

One of his questions had been answered. His conjecture that Sophie had been the cause of the nightmares had been totally off the mark, but this brought forth a new question.

"The sheep with a rosary hanging from its neck. That was Georg, wasn't it?"

"..."

Catherine's silence served as the answer to his query. All of the fragmented happenings began coming together in his head like a jigsaw puzzle.

"The mysterious deaths have something to do with this dream, don't they?"

"Yeah."

*"If you dream of falling and don't wake up right away, you die"* —who had said that?

"The rumours were true. That means that Daryl's death..."

"Yeah. He fell here and was culled."

"What do you mean, culled? We're not saplings."

"Hey, that hurts!"

Catherine shook free from Freddie's grasp. A faint redness stood out against the white of the shoulder he had grabbed.

"Ask *him* for the full details. He just asked me to help. All I can probably tell you is that everyone who gets in the way of the 'flourishing of the species' is tossed into this world, and if they can't climb all the way up to the end they die."

"'Flourishing of the species'? So basically baby-making, then?"

"Even more simply than that, I guess it could just be marriage or whatever. I don't really know. Anyway, all of the sheep who come here are considered 'people who get in the way of healthy-minded women.' That's what he told me, anyway."

So that meant that men who wouldn't commit to marriage were subject to being culled, then? Now that she mentioned it, it did seem to fit. Daryl's wife had found out about an affair at work and filed for divorce, but everyone at the office knew that, worried about appearances, he'd kept denying it. Freddie had dated and cast aside many women in his life, but the word 'marriage' had never so

much as crossed his lips. Maybe there were women who bore a grudge towards him because of it.

"Then Georg..."

Had he started a relationship with Stella, doing what he pleased with her body and intending all the while to toss her aside? Ignoring his own faults, a blistering anger rose up within Freddie. *That goddamn old witch. You can't just do whatever you like to Stella. She's wiser than she looks, clever, and strong-willed. I think she would've made a good friend, if she wasn't a woman.* Catherine watched Freddie silently as he bit his lip.

"Come to think of it, where is Stella?"

The voice in the fog had promised Freddie that if he could make it to the top, he would be able to see both women. As long as it had been telling the truth, Stella had to be here, too. He looked around, but couldn't see her anywhere.

"What's going on?"

"I dunno. I was just waiting here because I was interested in you."

"Interested in... me?"

"Watching you climb gave me chills." Catherine licked her lips lightly. The leech-like movements, which he hadn't seen in a while, almost seemed to suck Freddie in, enthralled. "Hey. What do you want to do to me?" For once, her question was serious.

"Right. I've been looking for you for ages, wanting to tell you this."

Freddie took her hand. Her silky skin was cold, but not without warmth. In all honesty, he couldn't care less about a cull or some plan; all he wanted was to see Catherine again and speak with her. That determination was what had brought him this far.

"I want you with me," he said, staring straight at Catherine. It was probably the first time he had looked a

woman in the eyes when talking to her since elementary school. "I like you. I want us to live together forever."

"Wh-what? I can't." As if Freddie's confession had come as a surprise, a blush came over Catherine's porcelain cheeks and she turned away. "I mean, I'm a succubus."

"That doesn't matter, does it?"

"It *does* matter."

Catherine twisted away from Freddie's hand as he brought his face closer and took a step back. Hand on her hip, she let out a deep sigh that seemed purposely exaggerated.

"Honestly, Freddie." With that, she finally seemed to regain her composure. Drawing her shapely eyebrows together, she gazed at him with upturned eyes. "Have a gooood think about it. Being with me means that you can't stay the way you are now."

"The way I am now?"

"I'm *saying* that you won't be human anymore."

Catherine's tone was casual, but that was what told him that it was the truth. The unexpected response brought the high-flying Freddie crashing back down to earth.

"I won't be human anymore? So what happens to my life?"

"We'll be living together in the spirit realm, so you're gonna have to give up your life in the other world. Then you'll be a demon, like us."

"For real?"

"You don't wanna?"

Catherine's eyes glinted blue, probing. He'd never thought that he would have to stop being human; the thoughts that filled his head had been of him awakening from the dream in his own room and carrying on happily with Catherine as they had been.

"What about my unfinished work?"

The blank proposal document. He'd be fired if he didn't submit it by tomorrow.

"None of that matters anymore, does it? You just want to be with me, right?" Catherine whispered seductively. "Then nothing else matters, right?"

He thought of his car, in for repairs. He wondered if he should buy a new one. He'd never considered it before, and yet suddenly, cruelly, he wanted to do it desperately. And his fridge had been on the blink lately, too. His PC magazine was out tomorrow, and he still hadn't opened any of the beers he'd bought. Freddie pictured having a cold beer after work and gulped.

"...What's wrong?" Catherine looked at the silent Freddie in confusion.

"H-hey, uh..."

"What?"

"Um, can you, like, drink beers and stuff in the spirit realm?"

Catherine's eyes lost their sparkle. A clear film covered them as she watched Freddie, her blushing cheeks chilling. He realised now that he shouldn't have said it, but it was too late.

"Oh. So you like reality more than me, huh?" Her eyes were hidden behind long eyelashes.

"I never said that. I just..."

"No. It's alright." Catherine drew back by another step. He reached out to her, but she was too far. "I knew, really. Maybe I've had just a bit too much of a fun dream."

She turned her face away from him. Had he imagined the tremble at the end of her sentence?

"It was silly of me to think of how nice it would be to live with a human, even though I'm a succubus... I'm... sorry."

"Catherine, wait!"

"I guess this is goodbye, then."

"Hey, Catherine?"

"Bye-bye."

Face still downcast, Catherine waved to Freddie. She vanished, as if melting away.

"Catherine!"

He leapt to her breast, trying to embrace her, but his hands clutched in vain at empty air.

"Catheriiiiiiiiine!"

His cry was swallowed up by the silver moon, and Catherine was gone. He collapsed to his knees. He'd screwed up right at the very end. Struggling to breathe, he clawed at his throat. The feeling was so terrible that 'regret' didn't cover it.

How long did he spend like that? Freddie finally got unsteadily to his feet. Before him was the golden door. Now that he had lost Catherine, he had no business left in this world. He could only return to his own reality. As he reached out to grip the knob, the door was enveloped in a pale light.

"What!?"

Surprised by the faintly blurry door, he panicked and dashed inside, but there was nothing opposite. While he had been lost in his confusion, the door had completely vanished.

"Hold on!"

Now he wouldn't be able to return to the real world.

"Don't fuck with me now. Not after coming this far."

The top of the spire was narrow, surely no larger than Freddie's one-room apartment. There was nothing aside from the spiral stairs he had climbed to get there, and an expanse of black stone flooring. Freddie had been left all alone in this narrow space. The previously forgotten chill returned.

"Catherine!" he yelled in a half-scream. "Catherine? Can you hear me? Let me out of here!"

There was no response.

"Catherine!"

Spontaneous tears streamed from his eyes. He paced frantically, repeating the name of the woman who had said her goodbyes and desperately searching for a secret passage, but could find nothing.

"So it's a dead end, huh!? No chance in hell; not when I've come this far. Someone. Let me out. Let me out of here!"

He couldn't even hear that awful whispering voice from the fog.

"What the hell? There's no way...!"

A feeling of despondency stabbed at him. What had all of his efforts up until now been for? Was he to spend the rest of his life here, never moving either forward or back?

*No. No no no.*

Freddie flailed his arms like a child throwing a tantrum. *I am not letting it end like this. I'll live. I'll survive. There are still things I have to do in the real world.*

"Let me out of here! If this still isn't the end, I'll climb as high as you want me to!" he screamed, using up the last of his strength.

As his voice melted into the emptiness, it happened—a golden rope slipped soundlessly from above.

"What in the...?"

He gripped the rope timidly. It wasn't a hallucination; he could feel it against his palm. The rope was pleasantly cool, but seemed strong enough to support Freddie's body weight. He looked up and saw that the rope seemed to lead up to the giant moon hanging overhead.

"You want me to climb up there, huh?"

This spire wasn't the top floor. Something else awaited him up ahead—that *had* to be it. He repeated this to himself, then tugged hard on the rope. It felt sturdy. The

other end appeared to be firmly anchored, and he didn't think he would have to worry about it snapping midway up.

"Let's go, then."

✤

He gripped the rope with both hands, crossing over his legs and wrapping himself around it as he climbed. He had no rope-climbing experience, but it was easier than he'd thought. He scaled it at a pace that surprised even him, and before he knew it he had left the spire far below.

"Yikes."

He shouldn't have looked down so carelessly. Instinctive fear of his hand slipping rose within. Trying his hardest not to think about it, he resumed his climb, focusing intently on moving up.

"How far does this go, exactly?"

His goal was definitely the moon above. As proof, the moon grew larger as he climbed, by now covering more than half of the sky. Its pockmarked face glinted silver.

*"Freddie,"* he heard a woman's voice say. He thought he might have been hearing things, until the voice repeated itself: *"Freddie."*

Sophie couldn't have chased after him, could she? Freddie shook his head, flustered, brushing off the pooling doubt. *There's no way. Sophie was just some delusion in my head—and didn't Catherine say that she had vanished completely?*

"Freddie."

*So what's this woman's voice that's seeping straight into my head?*

He wanted to cover his ears, but couldn't take his hands away. If he did, it would be head over heels into the abyss for him. This was the worst form of torture.

*"I've been waiting for this moment, for so long..."* The joyful voice let out a snicker.

"Stella. That's you, isn't it, Stella?" No other woman laughed that way. "Where are you? I've been looking for you for ages."

Freddie looked all around, still clinging to the rope. Stella, however, was of course not floating in the air.

*"Me too, Freddie. I've wanted to see you for so long."*

"Are you… trapped in the nightmare, too?"

Had Stella got lost in the real world and wandered into the nightmares on this side?

*"No. Only men get dragged into the nightmare. I came here by choice."*

"By choice? What do you mean? Why would you do something like that?"

*"Why? Isn't it obvious?"* Stella's tone changed abruptly, calm one moment and explosively emotional the next. *"To get revenge on youuuuu!"*

If her emotions could be summed up by one word, it would be 'curse.' The rope to which he clung swayed violently. Freddie wrapped his body tightly around it, trying to avoid being shaken off, and shouted back.

"What do you mean by revenge? Not that I can't think of anything at all, but…"

*"It doesn't matter anymore."* Stella slammed Freddie with murderous emotion, no longer even attempting to conceal the hatred that spewed forth. *"You can't tell me you don't remember Georg."*

"Georg. Right. So you two really *were*…" Freddie bit his lip. Pain filled his chest, but he looked up, shaking it off. "I'm not gonna go off at you for getting with Georg at this point. You're both adults, and yeah, I was shocked at first, but it's okay now."

"…"

Stella remained silent, so he gulped and went on.

"I wasn't looking for you because I was jealous or anything like that; I was just honestly worried about you, since you up and vanished all of a sudden. I just wanted to

talk it out with you and then have a clean break-up. That's all."

"..."

"So show yourself to me. We can talk face-to-face, okay?"

*"Talk it out? Hah."* Stella let out a dry laugh. *"You want me to talk things out with you when you don't get any of it? I was going out with Georg? That's not possible."*

"What do you mean?"

Freddie's body stiffened at the unexpected profession. Hadn't Stella been two-timing him? There were a bunch of things that wouldn't explain, though. Their matching rosaries. The photo of them standing side by side. How was she going to explain those away?

*"Georg wasn't my boyfriend."* Stella's voice was filled with pain, like she was dragging out feelings that had been stowed secretly away in her heart. *"He was someone far more important to me than that. He was my little brother."*

The confession made Freddie feel as though his back had snapped. The shock made his hands slip, and his body slid down a few feet. He was lucky to just barely be able to regain his grip on the rope. He was suspended high in the air, swaying to and fro like a pendulum.

Brother. Georg... was Stella's brother. *Don't be so stupid. That's not possible. Their surnames are different and everything.*

*"Georg was my stepfather's son. I was an only child, and had wanted a little brother so badly since I was little. When I got my wish, I wondered if I was dreaming."*

"..."

Like the whiteboard being erased after a planning meeting, all of Freddie's thoughts had been wiped clean.

*"I loved my brother so dearly. I got him a matching rosary for his birthday, and we went places like the amusement park. He idolised me. And you..."* Her tone suddenly shifted. *"Freddie. You killed him."*

The falling sheep. Georg.

"No way..."

*"We'd talked several times. About a bizarre dream in which he climbed castle walls. About him being chased by a strange creature, and about the appearance of the sheep he met there."*

"No..."

*"My brother said he helped you; that he was glad to be of use, even if it was in a dream. And this is how you repaid him?"*

"That wasn't my fault. There was nothing I could do. It wasn't within my power to help."

*"You stole away my happiness."*

"Stella, please, listen..."

*"No!"*

Stella didn't seem interested in hearing any more of Freddie's excuses. Her curse-filled voice echoed even louder inside his head, making him feel like his brain would explode. *Is this Stella's revenge?* he wondered inside his foggy head. *Luring me to a place with no escape route and torturing me as much as she pleases?*

Slick with sweat, his hands loosened their grip on the rope. He wrapped his body around it, somehow managing to cling on.

"Cut it out. Help me, Stella."

*"*Help *you?"* She chuckled. *"That choice isn't mine to make."*

The rope began to swing from side to side more violently. He felt like a small boat being tossed about by the wind.

*"I'll tell you something good. I'm pregnant."*

He was no longer even calm enough to respond. It took all he had just to cling to the rope and stop himself from falling.

*"It's your child."*

He remembered the pregnancy test that Toby had found at her house. Pregnant? Could it be?

*"Let's talk about Rapunzel."* Leaving Freddie in his daze, Stella suddenly changed the subject. *"The Rapunzel I came up with... Once upon a time, there lived a princess."*

She began to speak as if in recitation of a story. It was one of Stella's habits when talking about the plot for one of her books.

*"Rapunzel was shut up all alone inside a tall, tall tower. Her only company was the witch who had shut her away there, who would sometimes come to check on her. Do you think she was unhappy?"*

Freddie couldn't think of anything. Stella continued, not seeming to want a response.

*"No. Rapunzel was happy. She was satisfied with her life inside the tower with the witch. She had never so much as considered leaving it."*

"..."

*"One day, she happened to be looking out from the tower. On a pure whim, her gaze was caught by a songbird that was passing the window. That was when the prince appeared. He looked up at Rapunzel from the foot of the tower, and found himself desperately craving her pure body, untouched by man."*

A rainy night. He had happened to spot her, and called out to her. It was the first time after he'd selfishly cast Sophie aside that he'd begun to miss the feel of a woman. The princess had said that her name was Stella.

*"The prince cunningly convinced Rapunzel to let down her long hair. Not knowing anyone other than the witch, she dangled her hair from the tower as told without suspicion. The prince used it to climb to the top of the tower, then forced his way into her room."*

Rapunzel, pinned down to the bed, breathing heavily. Her white skin and golden hair were illuminated by the moonlight.

*"Once the prince had done the deed, he left with a laugh, leaving Rapunzel behind. Finally, she noticed that*

*her belly was growing large. Yes. She was pregnant—with the unwanted child of the man."*

He hadn't bothered with contraception, and Rapunzel hadn't said no, so she hadn't thought that it mattered. Was she going to accuse him of it now?

*"Rapunzel was worried. Yes. She would discuss it with the witch. She would surely be able to offer her some wisdom. But, oh, what misfortune—the witch had been killed by the prince, pushed from the tall tower."*

A lone sheep plummeting into the abyss.

*"Unforgivable. Rapunzel shed tears of blood. Not only had he violated her, but he had murdered the witch, her only support. She hated him. She hated the prince. She said curse upon curse, waiting patiently until she could exact her revenge. Finally, her wish was granted."*

"That's enough, Stella!" Freddie yelled. All too late, he finally understood what it was that Stella was up to. The rotation of the moon overhead steadily increased in speed, exposing its hidden side.

"It was my fault. Please, forgive me."

*"It's too late for that."*

As the moon turned, it exposed pomegranate-coloured lips. A slender nose. Long eyelashes. The fissures that crept across its surface slowly widened, grey-green eyes that reminded him of a thick forest opening wide. They stared straight down at Freddie.

The moon was Stella's giant face. The golden rope that hung down from it and from which Freddie dangled was her hair.

*"The prince climbed his way up the entire tower."* Stella's huge, unblinking eyes moved closer, seeming on the verge of swallowing Freddie up. *"But that isn't how my Rapunzel will end."*

"Stella, stop this."

Freddie could hear something. It was a faint sound, like the snipping of bundles of branches being hacked off with a

hatchet. Suddenly, the resistance of the hair he had been holding onto loosened, and his body began to slide downwards. A few feet above his head, invisible scissors were cutting Stella's hair right across.

"Stella!"

*"Goodbye, Freddie. My prince."*

The moon smiled sadly. As it did so, the lifeline he clutched was severed.

*"The nightmare won't end. You will wander the world of the rift for eternity."*

"Stellaaaaaaaaaaa!" Freddie screamed as he fell. On and on and on he fell in blind darkness, for what felt like forever.

✤

He could hear a siren. He woke to the unpleasant feeling of its strong yet weak rocking, undulating against his body. Opening his eyes, still lying flat on his back in bed, the siren turned into a sharp, cutting sound that flooded Freddie's ears. It seemed to be coming from the real world, not a dream—and from very close by, at that.

"My head's killing me."

Each time the siren sounded, it felt like his brain was being scooped out. He covered his ears with the sheets and got up, opening the curtains. The red lights of police cars flooded in along with the morning sunlight. Several of them were parked outside the neighbouring building, policemen hurrying to and fro. A curious crowd surrounded them. He even saw a few people holding cameras who looked like they were members of the press.

"Huh?"

The adjacent building, much like this one, was a cheap apartment complex. It was a cheaply-built, three-storey affair, and he had seen immigrant workers and people struggling to find employment come and go late at night.

He didn't know their names or backgrounds, of course. All he knew was that, like him, they smelled of outsider.

He turned on the TV. The news was just starting.

*"We have just received some breaking news. At around 7AM this morning, an apartment door was found open at a building at 13 Walter Street, and a person was found collapsed inside by a fellow resident."*

That was the apartment right next door. Headache forgotten, he leaned towards the TV.

*"The police were notified, and an officer discovered a woman lying unconscious inside Room #6. The woman was taken to hospital, but it has now been confirmed that she has died. From the driver's licence found on her person, the deceased appears to be Ms. Stella Simmons, 29."*

Time came to a standstill for Freddie.

*"From the state of the scene, the police appear to have ruled that there is a high possibility that this was a suicide."*

Suicide? Stella?

The newsreader's matter-of-fact reading of her script grew fuzzy.

*"According to the resident who found her, Ms. Simmons had moved in three days earlier, but had hardly been seen and had no friends nearby."*

The report continued, but there was no more detailed information. Freddie got unsteadily to his feet, crossing the room in order to go outside. He at least wanted to know what had happened. What was the cause of death? Why had she been renting a cheap apartment next door? In order to obtain more information, he decided to visit the scene.

"Hm?"

His foot caught on something in front of the bookcase. He reflexively looked down, seeing something black and metallic lying on the floor.

"What's this?"

He picked it up and saw that it was a small camera. Containing a battery, it was roughly the size of his index finger—one used for dubious spying purposes, then. It wasn't familiar to Freddie.

"What's something like this doing here?"

He hadn't noticed it at all the night before. Or had it been there for even longer than that? Who had put it there, when, and what for?

He sensed an eerie coincidence. The situation bore a strong resemblance to the proposal he and Catherine had come up with together.

"Could there be more...?"

He swept his eyes across the room. His own, familiar room felt to him now like an alien planet.

*Cameras. Countless cameras, watching me.*

Letting out a muffled scream, he fled the room on still-bare feet, hurrying down the stairs and outside. The sun was dazzlingly bright, but to him, it seemed like the fires of hell torching his body.

"What an awful thing."

The onlookers were standing around chatting, watching the next-door apartment. Without even trying to listen, he could hear what they were saying.

"Still so young. Sounds like she was pretty poor, too."

"Poor thing. I have no idea what she was going through, but death surely wasn't the answer."

"Have you heard? Keith, the guy who was the first to find her, says she stabbed herself in the throat with scissors."

"For real!?"

Through his daze, Freddie listened to the rubberneckers' commotion. He somehow managed to support his body, on the verge of collapse though it was, and slowly approached them.

*Death by stabbing herself in the throat. Was there really nothing else? Tell me more about Stella.*

"There was something even weirder, too."

"Something weirder?"

"I heard the landlord talking to the police. It sounds like the dead woman chopped all her hair off to the root."

All of her hair. Cut off.

"I hear it was super long hair that went almost to her waist, but when the body was found, all of her cut-off hair was found coiled up next to it."

"Geez. Give it a rest; you're creepin' me out."

"Was it really a suicide? Maybe some pervert did it."

"I dunno, but the media are saying that it's likely she cut it off herself."

*Stella had cut all of her hair off. Right. Stella had done it to herself.*

*"Goodbye, Freddie,"* he remembered her say.

Suddenly, Freddie felt like the ground beneath his feet was giving way and he crouched down, grabbing onto it, letting out a long-short scream. One of the onlookers, noticing this, walked over with a concerned look.

"What's wrong? You okay?"

"Look at the face on him. Maybe he should be taken to hospital, too."

He couldn't hear what they were saying. All he heard was Stella's triumphant voice.

"I'll always be watching you—from the depths of hell, with those cameras."

The image of Stella in his retinas was of her with her hair cut short like a boy's, gripping the camera he'd found in his room in her right hand. She grinned at Freddie.

"You'll be coming here too, soon."

"Uwaaaaaaah!"

He shoved past the onlookers and sprinted away. He couldn't stand being there any longer. He had to get out of there—just run somewhere far away. Freddie kept running, sobbing, until he could no longer see the cursed apartment.

✤

Midnight. A single light was lit in the corner of an empty office building. A man sat at the desk below it, working. He booted up his PC, tapping away intently at the keyboard. His clothes were caked with mud, stubble covering his slightly dirty face, but his eyes sparkled as if possessed.

*Women really are terrifying,* the man thought. *But if I'd been more faithful to them, maybe this would never have had to happen to me.*

Catherine. Sophie. Stella. The women's faces surfaced and vanished inside his mind. Where had he gone wrong? He hadn't fallen and died of weakness without ever reaching the top. Just as Stella had warned, the nightmare followed him everywhere.

His throat was dry. The man loosened his collar, realising that he hadn't spoken for some time. He wanted a drink—a rum and coke.

The small, run-down bar that stood inconspicuously in the rift of the night. What had it been called? Yes, the Stray Sheep. Were the people he had met there doing well?

"Orlando... Jonny... Toby... Vincent..." he muttered.

*Don't let yourselves become like me. Not like this. I'm the only one who needs to fail with women.*

His tapping at the keyboard increased in speed. The screen filled with words at the same pace he thought them, making it seem unbelievable that he had once struggled so hard to write.

*"Each level is composed of square blocks, and the character can move them around at their discretion to form a path."*

*"Insert a story in between levels to form a background for the game."*

*"Aim not to have just one solution, but to let the player come up with methods using their own ideas."*

Tap tap tap. Tap tap tap.

The passages now went beyond the man's control, filling the screen of their own accord. Soon. Soon it would be done. He had thrown away every proposal he had written so far and given his all to this one. He wanted men to play the game and use it to create favourable relationships with women, so they would get their happy ending.

"A game to set you free from the nightmare..."

This was a gospel for the lost lambs, the man believed, and continued to type.

# Epilogue

The Stray Sheep. A place that served as a brief respite for the souls of the sheep who gathered there with nowhere to go.

"What's this?"

As Vincent sat down in his usual seat, he noticed an unfamiliar file sitting atop the table. A thick stack of word-smothered A4 pages had been stuffed inside a seethrough folder.

"Maybe the last customer forgot it?"

Jonny called to Erica, who stood beside the counter. "Lost and found for you, Erica."

"Comiiing."

Toby stared with secret envy as Erica made her way over to Jonny, her steps light. Erica, however, took the file from Vincent without noticing it. After taking a glance at the front page, she shook her head, not seeming to have any idea to whom it belonged.

"You're the first customers here today, though."

"Really? It's not ours."

Vincent looked around at his friends one by one. Jonny, Toby, Orlando. They all shook their heads, but Erica shrugged softly.

"It's alright. I'll take it and pass it on to the owner."

"Thanks."

Erica took the folder from Vincent, then made her way over to the bartender soon after. That was the end of it for Vincent and the others. They soon forgot the minor event, quickly getting into their friendly chatter.

"How're things with Katherine these days?" Orlando asked instead of a greeting, and, as always, Vincent took a gulp of his rum and coke and grumbled.

"Nothing's happening."

"Nothing? She doesn't have anything to talk to you about?" said Jonny.

"What d'you mean by somethin' to talk about?" Toby said, sticking his nose in. *Oh, nothing,* Jonny answered vaguely, evading the question.

Vincent ordered a refill for his empty glass and Erica, with a resigned expression and a sigh, warned him to take it easy.

✤

The Stray Sheep, a place for the lost to gather. Watching the men drinking their fill and taking puffs of cigarettes, Thomas Mutton pored over the folder that was spread open upon the counter. It was a proposal for a game. A programme code was attached, and it was so complete that it seemed like it would be ready for development right away if ordered from a manufacturer.

"Quite interesting, this," *he* murmured, eyes glinting behind his sunglasses. "I shall set one up in the bar post-haste. I should make some additions to the set-up on the other side, too."

His plan. It seemed like a good gateway to drag people into the nightmare to be culled. This was quite different from the creator's original intention for it, but...

"That is just how life goes. Yes."

He swiftly made a cocktail, holding it out to the empty air.

"A toast to your 'girlfriend'."

The game's title: *Rapunzel*.

# Afterword

Hello there. My name is Kazuaki Emoto. This book is a novelisation of Atlus' adventure game *Catherine* from a slightly different angle.

I'll let you read the book itself to find out what's different—have you all played the game?

Ahh, it's fun, isn't it? The combination of the hellish horror adventure sections, which make you want to see what comes next, and toughness (perhaps *too* much?) of the puzzle sections is perfect, and from the time I started it to the time I finished, I couldn't bring myself to put it down. Sometimes, I even shed tears on floors that I couldn't beat, and yelled, "I'll never be able to do *that* again!" at Vincent's miraculous climbing when I finally managed it.

That's how addictive it is, and if anyone has yet to play it, please do get yourself a copy. I recommend it.

By the way, my favourite characters are Jonny out of the men and Catherine out of the women. ...Oh, but it's hard to let go of Katherine, too. Struggling like this, I would surely be finding myself in the nightmare. Ahh, I'm falling...!

...Pardon me. I do have rather strange dreams each night, however. This means that I can't think of what happens to 'them' in a detached manner. I've actually had several dreams in which I'm falling myself. They're really scary, you know. They do startle me awake. And when I looked in the mirror and saw that my eyes were the eyes of a sheep... well, I don't really remember whether or not that happened, but that might be a good thing in itself.

I hope you all have good dreams. Another time, then.